

THE IM/POSSIBILITY OF TIME REGAINED: NAVIGATING THE UNSTABLE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF INTERNET ART

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Anxiety about the passage of time is traced from Proust to the current obsession with data overload and real time is interrogated by looking at historical and current work in various media of art that embodies either slowness or time adrenalized. The experience of duration in web-based art and adaptation to rapid change in the preservation and conservation of art made for the Internet is also touched upon.



Fig 1. *Industrial Strength* [CitySliders], 2011, Annette Weintraub, JQuery animations, dimensions variable.
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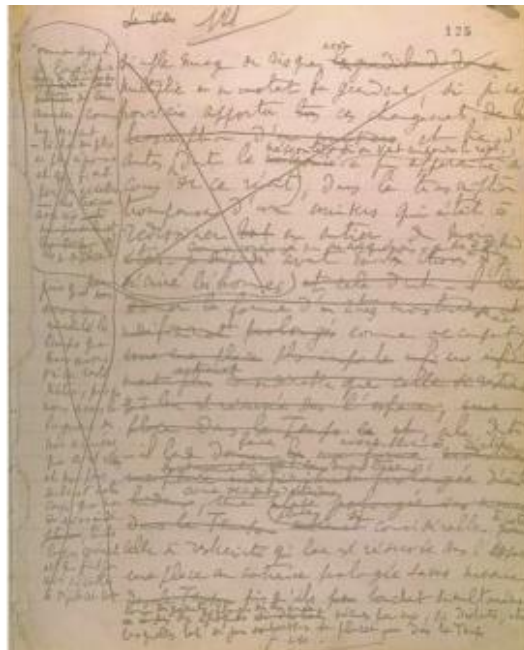


Fig 2. *Time Regained*, manuscript last page, Marcel Proust, 1922, Gallica Bibliothèque Numérique, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Public domain.



Fig 3. Time Regained, manuscript notebooks 69 and 75, 1916-17, Gallica Bibliothèque Numerique, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Public domain.

The perception of time accelerated

By titling the last part of his three-volume novel “In Search of Lost Time” (“À La Recherche du Temps Perdu”) as “Time Regained” (“Le Temps Retrouvé”), Marcel Proust, in the first decades of the 20th century, captured and anticipated our contemporary anxiety about time and consciousness of time passing. The last manuscript page, so poignantly layered with excisions and edits reads like a time-lapse image of his process, a one-page hypertext. [1]

A modern phenomenon, the sense of the onrush of time is a result of the increased rate of change since the Industrial Revolution. In recent decades, and with electronic media, this change is perceived as an unstoppable tidal wave of ‘too much information.’ Consciousness of change has evolved, from a general awareness of accelerated time, to an acutely internalized sense of change. This paper will examine the experience of duration in some web-based art and briefly touch on issues of adaptation to rapid change in the preservation and conservation of art made for the Internet.

ANXIETY AND CHANGE

“The enormous multiplication of books in every branch of knowledge is one of the greatest evils of this age; since it presents one of the most serious obstacles to the acquisition of correct information, by throwing in the reader's way piles of lumber in which he must painfully grope for the scraps of useful lumber, peradventure interspersed.” Edgar Allan Poe

In 1845, Edgar Allen Poe raged against the explosion in book publishing; his perception of the threat to attention and quality anticipating both Alvin Toffler's (1970) book "Information Overload" and Richard Saul Wurman's (1989) work "Information Anxiety." Toffler reported on the increased stress and impaired judgment consequent to rapid change, while Wurman offered coping strategies for information overload.

More recently, Nicholas Carr [2] has hyperventilated about how the Internet, social networking and the culture of instant response might be actually changing our brains and making us less able to engage in focused attention and deep thinking. While most of this is overheated rhetoric, there is pervasive unease over the perceived acceleration of change and the flood of new sensory inputs and flow of information.

WHAT IS 'REAL TIME'?

Yet if speed, fracture and overload are the outcome of the 20th century celebration of dynamic change, there are also works of contemporary art which engage 'real time' and slowness as counterweight. It's also possible that 'real time' as an artistic investigation became of interest just as our perception of actual real time in lived experience was eroding.

In Warhol's "Empire" (1964) [3], time is experienced minute-by-minute, with a slowness that can be meditative, contemplative, immersive or alternatively boring, suffocating and lacking drama. Warhol's film was shot at the offices of the Rockefeller Foundation in the Time-Life Building on July 25 from 8:06 p.m. to 2:42 a.m. It was shot at 24 frames per second but is projected more slowly, at 16 fps, so that 6 hours and 36 minutes of footage take about 8 hours to screen.

"Empire" focuses our attention on an iconic structure, seen over time. A viewer might zero in on the minute changes of light, color and background detail even as she twitched in boredom after hours of viewing. Or, she might settle into a reflective and highly conscious state.

From 1999 to 2004, in a web project that recapitulates that history in an homage to the Warhol film, Wolfgang Stahle installed a webcam in his office at The Thing which pointed at the Empire State building, and sent a stream of frames to an exhibition in Germany. [4] The project, called "24/7," changed the sequentially projected frames of Warhol's film into a discrete and even more attenuated sequence, making us aware of the continuum of time extended.

Experimental film of the 1960's also explored the perception of elapsed time. Michael Snow's influential film "Wavelength" (1967) captured non-dramatic time in a way that produced a hyperawareness of each second of duration. Snow is said to have described "Wavelength" as "a continuous 45-minute zoom across a New York City loft." [5] But it is much more than that. We see the continual play of shifts in color, apparent visual changes due to time of day, double exposures and very slow changes in framing, all belying Snow's simple description. Experientially, it is a 45-minute rollercoaster journey into the minutiae of daily life and a deep exploration of the relative perception of time.

Both Warhol and Snow's work may be seen as antecedents to entire genres of online work that incorporate continuous feeds from webcams, surveillance video or CCTV camera.

TIME ADRENALIZED

Yet even 'real time' isn't safe from acceleration. The 'real time' format of the TV series "24" is paradoxical: the minute-by-minute equivalence between plot action and viewing time is precise, yet the action in each moment of narrative is hopped-up and feels like real time on methamphetamine. [6]

The ticking digital clock, like the timer on a bomb, counts down the minutes of the hour, the quad-screen format multiplies the sense of urgency. The digital clock makes us aware of the moment, but alienates us from being in the moment. Perversely, as it ostensibly matches real minute for narrative minute, "24" gives us a speeded-up reality that is the opposite of "Empire." In Warhol's film there are many moments where nothing 'happens' and it feels like pure existence. In '24,' life is reduced to pure speed, with instantaneous choices and action at an unsustainable pace. The artificial tempo has an interesting effect: it intensifies duration and makes momentum addictive; the perfect format for an ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) culture.

EXPLOITING DURATION IN INTERNET ART

The image of real time adrenalized is an apt framework for looking at the challenges to artists working with technology. For early internet-based work, slowness was not a problem, it was a condition. In the era of dial-up, and of web pages of less than 33k in size, it was a priority to speed up download, hide the delay while preloading in the background, or use a progressive jpg to 'animate' the wait time. GIF animation, which was invented in 1987, also provided an illusion of speed, as did meta tag refresh animation.

Recently, the image blinking and color cycling of '90's GIF animation has been reinvented as a retro popular practice that paradoxically embodies both speed and slowness. The GIF animations of Tom Moody [7] have the frenetic and wacky quality of early GIFs but with a new playfulness and sophistication, while Nicholas Sassoon and Sarah Ludy, members of the artists' group Computers Club, have used GIF animation meditatively, particularly in a dreamily slow installation titled "Wallpaper" (2011) [8]. The repetition and cycling in their GIF animation creates a receptive space for extended duration: optically fast, but experientially slow and attenuated.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF DURATION, ACCLIMATION TO INSTANTANEITY

The constant competition for our attention span is certainly a factor in how we perceive duration. With growing availability of broadband there has been an explosion of sites online: currently there are 346,004,403 unique Internet hostnames compared to 18,000 in August 1995. [9] There is too much to see, and not enough time. This parallels the 'real world' as in the "8-second rule," a widely-reported statistic that calculated the amount of time a typical museum viewer spends in front of a work of art.

Coincidentally, 8 seconds is also the estimate of how long a web viewer waits on a download before hopping to another page, (although it now is being downgraded to 4 seconds). As we juggle multiple devices simultaneously, there's less tolerance for 'the wait' and more asynchronous I/O attention; it's packet switching instead of network switching. Online, slowness is by default defined as a problem, and the expectation is for immediate response and constant stimulation.

DURATION PROFILES

The duration profile of different media is something I've considered since my first web project in 1995. At that time, because of bandwidth considerations and access mostly by dial-up, the Web was strongly text-based. "Realms" used paired text and image to create an intimate bond with the reader, develop an online narrative and to mitigate the download time.

At home, at a café, or in a gallery, a work that's on an individual computer can connect in a way that is altered when the same work is projected for multiple viewers. The one-to-one relationship is appropriate for the intimacy of storytelling. Text also has an internal metronome that is constant—while a phrase or headline can be taken in at a glance, reading, even rapid reading, requires duration and self-limits speed.

My online projects since have mixed reading, hearing and seeing, using the intersections of repeating content in different formats to create a layered experience. This can produce a mediated overload, in which repetition or the restatement of themes, iconography or ideas emerge as the viewer cycles through overlapping iterations of text, audio and image. It also provides a way for the viewer to become immersed in a narrative environment.

"City Sliders" (2011) is a series of in-progress JQuery animations that explore the surface of urban space using moving text fragments and images. These animations construct a visual narrative about the texture of urban space using a repeating rhythm of horizontal and vertical directionals that change scale, weight and pattern and which represent the 'skin of the city.' The images are overlaid with texts that speak to the relationship between underlying structure and external appearance. "City Sliders" incorporates original photographs and images from 3D models that were built, lit and texture-mapped in Cinema4D; a later iteration will add ambient sound and audio monologue.

"One Text, Many Stories" (2009) was based on the idea of repeating a single text in a variety of visual contexts in order to elicit different readings through alteration of visual context. An original text composed of nine short passages describes an urban space reconstituted in memory, and is interspersed with short extracts from Michael de Certeau's "The Practice of Everyday Life" and "The Production of Space" by Henri Lefèbre. The text fragments can be read in varying order (not necessarily in entirety) and reinterpreted as the images and page structure change. Each page was configured differently in CSS so that page elements expanded, changed format or position, re-sequenced or were given different emphasis, depending on the dimension of the browser page and the viewer's interaction.

"Crossroads" (2000) mixes overlapping sound, moving image and text in purposeful cacophony to represent the visual and aural landscape of Times Square. "Crossroads" also explores how film genres and advertising culture shape our sense of place. Based on elements of the mythic and actual Times Square and 42nd Street, each page has several looping texts and animations; the audio monologues are activated by rolling over the animations, but play independently and are not synched. Two actors speak from different perspectives: a film buff describes how Times Square has figured in film and a storyteller presents a series of fictive narratives in monologue. "Crossroads" also represents for me the difficulty of conserving or migrating Internet projects in an era of rapid change. The original (and still extant online form) which included programmed QuickTime, Flash and Javascript has been updated several times due to changes in scripting versions and is more easily seen in an archived video. [10]

RIDING THE WAVE OF RAPID CHANGE: CONSERVATION, ARCHIVING AND ADAPTATION

As an artist making projects for the Internet, I am aware changing technology pushing me forward in new work at the same time as I am looking backwards at projects that have been stranded or mutated unpredictably through browser obsolescence.

This pull of simultaneous opposing directions creates a Proustian nightmare in which the involuntary memory is not the savor of a treasured bite of the past, but a nightmare reverie on the instability of past, present and future. In this context, slowness takes on a different meaning: an awareness of the quicker and shorter life cycle of a technology.

Humans are said to be the only animals that have foreknowledge of their own death; new media artists now have inescapable foreknowledge of the possible loss of their work. The 'shelf-life' of art made in the context of this rapid evolution, can be short and this may be inherent in the environment, a feature and not a bug. Electronic arts pose difficulties of conservation, archiving and preservation that are of a different order of magnitude than other arts media. These works can have a long gestation and a short lifespan.

Old media can be subsumed by newer media and their characteristics can migrate (leaving the signature of the older media behind, but transferring essential attributes, as in the evolution of wet to digital photography). But while media can migrate, individual works may disappear. The rapid evolution of web tools creates an underlying instability that is a constant in making work for the Internet. While a work may embody some aspect of slowness, the context of the work is anything but slow.

MANAGING SHELF-LIFE

Net artists are particularly aware of the issue of retrofit fatigue: anyone who has gone back to update old projects understands the conflicted emotions of wanting to preserve older work while preferring to do new work. There are also issues of temporal context, of how to frame work that utilized or incorporated some technical element that was notable at the time, but which is incomprehensible or seems unremarkable once its moment has passed. Retrofit is more straightforward when content is central, but shifts in technologies do alter meaning.

There are several options for dealing with this issue: accept the expendability and ephemeral quality of net art and let it break; migrate the work to the current net environment by updating; or show the work in another format that may convey the appearance and preserve the content, but is no longer the original work. In the case of work that has stopped functioning, or which is beyond reconstruction, documentation seems the only course, and in fact, this is the approach taken by many Net artists who show screenshots or make videos of a web project interaction.[11]

SLOWNESS AS WILLED EXPERIENCE

To work on a constantly shifting platform and in an environment of short shelf-life is to live with instability. To make work that asks the viewer to slow down in an atmosphere of accelerating change is paradoxical, perverse, even counterintuitive. It resists much of what we think of as the inherent properties of life online: speed, instantaneity, divided attention, a 'quick read.'

But like meditation, slowness can be thought of as a practice, and a willed experience. And like meditation, the practice of slowness opens up space for reflection and engagement. Returning to the online images of Proust's manuscript pages, his handwritten notebook pages overlaid with bits of pasted paper, the 'paperoles,' [12] extend out from the parent page, and seem to also expand outward in time and space, in a visually apt metaphor for the lived duration and layered experience they inscribe.

References and Notes:

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