

DD3016
History of Design
Essay

Question

iii. Choose a historic or contemporary media artist not discussed in class to carry out independent research that draws from our study of interactive media history, theory and its concepts and forms. The artist and their work should be relevant to our study of multimedia concepts and paradigms (ie Interactivity, Hypermedia, Immersion).

Gwendolyn Say
U1830241A

Word Count: 770

In 1945, Dr. Vannevar Bush, an American engineer wrote about a device called the 'Memex' in his essay titled 'As We May Think'. It could store all kinds of information which would be easily accessible by the user through mechanised actions. He saw the necessity of such a device, for Man had 'built a civilization so complex' (Bush, 1945) that we required something to index all this knowledge and the uncountable associations between various information. Today we have become familiar with the device he dreamt of -- our smartphones, laptops and tablets are all in essence, Memexes. But while Bush was thinking about this device in terms of its scientific function, I argue that his theories are today especially relevant in the field of interactive art. Interactive art is one of the many ways we navigate the 'post-Internet' and 'post-digital' era which is conceptually and practically shaped by the Internet and digital processes (Paul, 2016). By nature of the context that interactive art exists in and the issues it addresses, interactive art addresses the complexity of societies that Bush had observed decades ago, except it contends with the intricacies of human experience rather than that of scientific information. In this essay I will address how interactive artists mediate the complexities of being through interactivity, hypermedia and immersion by analysing select works from the art collective, FLONG.

The first work, *Reface [Portrait Sequencer]* mashes up various portions of the viewer's face with that of other viewers' [Annex; 1]. When the viewer blinks, it edits the video clips being recorded for the mashup, and also triggers the display to advance to the next set of face combinations (Levin, 2019). *Reface* is an interactive work that allows the user to manipulate the display through blinking, changing how they experience the work. In addition, each user has a unique experience as their presence serves as an addition to the work, which consequently transforms it into a new collection of mash-ups not seen by the previous viewer. Through synthesising the users into parts of a unified face, and granting the user access to these mash-ups by blinking, *Reface* builds up an interactive database that presents a new way of evaluating our identities as individuals in a collective of people. The work's interactivity is an approachable way for audiences to observe and affect the visual data, from which they feel greater engagement to reflect upon the self and the self in a collective.

The second work, *The Dumpster* is an interactive online visualisation (Levin, 2019) that extracts postings about breakups from millions of online blogs [Annex; 2]. Each post can be read by clicking on a dot of colour, which make up an assemblage of personal narratives. The site displays connections between individual postings and represents it visually by using colour to categorise posts that are textually similar. In this work, Levin explores hypermedia by conflating multiple sources and types of content, such as visual, textual and timestamps into one digital space. He creates connections between the various types of data, revealing associations between experiences of different individuals, and the language used to express such experiences. By presenting and arranging the information in a non-linear fashion, the user

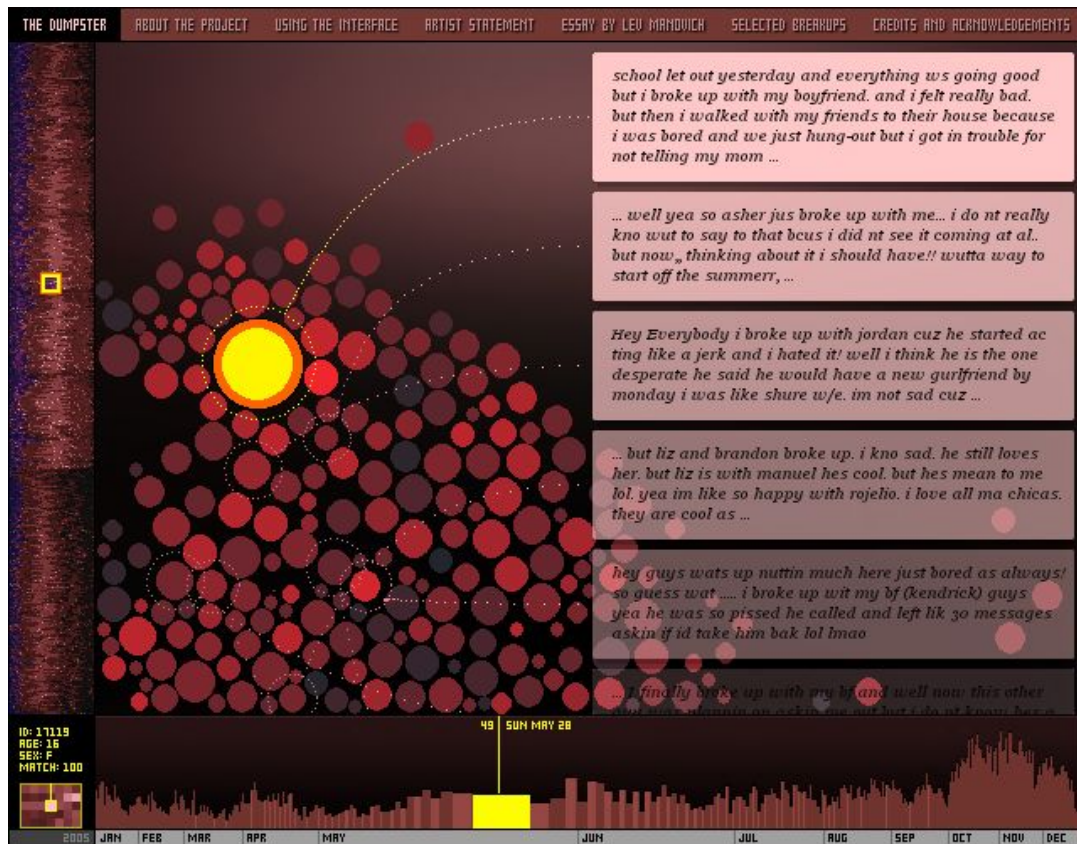
can explore the site in an idiosyncratic manner as opposed to an indexed method. Using hypermedia, Levin paints a collective portrait about a particular human experience that users may explore as they wish - perhaps the most appropriate way to do so when mediating such a complex topic that numerical or scientific ways of representation cannot render in completion.

Lastly, in *Hidden Worlds of Noise and Voice* users wear augmented reality (AR) devices that enable them to see abstract graphics, produced by the users' voices, superimposed onto the real world [Annex; 3]. This work deals with immersion by intervention into the viewer's reality, allowing the viewer to experience entering into a surreal world. There is an added layer of immersion which is induced through giving the user the agency to affect what they see by producing sound. By materialising speech, Levin underlines the ethereal nature of sound, and attempts to capture it in a visible way. This work converges digital technologies in various materialities (Paul, 2016) - sound, visual, experience - to engage viewers in a whole new reality. But instead of being a scientific endeavour, Levin's work engages the senses in a bid to make observations about human speech and communication.

In conclusion, from Levin's works, we see how interactive art effectively conveys the multiple complexities of humanity, mediating it through techniques of interaction, hypermedia and immersion. While Vannevar envisioned a memex for storing information, I believe that interactive art is a Memex of human experiences and associations, and an important medium through which we discuss the human condition.

Annex





Bibliography

1. Bush, Vannevar. "As We May Think." The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 2018.
www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/.
2. Levin, Golan. 2019. "Reface [Portrait Sequencer] By Golan Levin And Collaborators". *Flong.Com*.
<http://www.flong.com/projects/reface/>.
3. Levin, Golan. 2019. "The Dumpster - Interactive Art By Golan Levin And Collaborators".
Flong.Com. <http://www.flong.com/projects/dumpster/>.
4. Levin, Golan. 2019. "Hidden Worlds Of Noise And Voice - Interactive Art By Golan Levin And Collaborators". *Flong.Com*. <http://www.flong.com/projects/hwnv/>.
5. Paul, Christiane. 2016. *A Companion To Digital Art*. 1st ed. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.