Authorship and agency in networked environments

by Simon Biggs

abstract

This text discusses how our understanding of authorship has evolved over the past few decades and how this process is now being effected by developments in network and communications technologies. Situating the discussion in relation to post-structuralist theory, Actor Network Theory and the anthropological work of James Leach the impact of network technologies are considered, with particular attention to the emergence of distributed forms of authorship and models of expanded agency.

The work of two artists who engage network and communications technologies in distinct ways is discussed in order to evoke perspectives on emergent forms of authorship and agency. The work of Mez Breeze is considered as evidencing a shift in authorship from the human author to an agency of computability embedded in the formal structures of the language employed in the work, suggesting that the text operates as an automatic generative system that constructs the reader as computational interpreter.

The Megafone mobile communications project by Antonio Abad and Eugenio Tisselli is discussed as an activity where authorship is distributed across a population of people connected to and mediated by mobile network technologies. The existence of a networked community operating as an automatic generative system is considered as a form of expanded agency where subject, agency and community are evoked as an autopoietic apparatus.

The text concludes by identifying the argument as a set of complex interactions that can be seen not only as agents of creation but also as a creative outcome. It is suggested that the outcome of a creative act is not necessarily the primary expression of creativity but rather incidental to a process that is itself creative agency.

Introduction

The identification of the author as the primary source of agency in the existence of a creative work has been widely contested. Philosophers have perennially questioned the nature of agency, its origins and effects. Authorship and agency can be considered to be deeply connected. Following on from Barthes "death of the author" numerous cultural theorists and critics have called for expanded definitions of authorship. Social scientist Bruno Latour has described an expanded definition of agency that can allow us to reflect upon its diffuse character. He argues for an appreciation of agency that includes not only people but also systems, instruments and networks (Latour 2005). Thus authorship and agency can be regarded as diffuse and distributed in their relations and origins. In such a field of expanded agency any action, and the subsequent outcomes, can be seen to originate from, or within, non-conventional, diffused and difficult to identify sources – from various devices, machines, apparatus, networks, communities and the relationships between these and other forms of agency.

What happens to creative works when they emerge from such diffused sources of agency and authorship? Can we still consider authorship a principle factor in the genesis of the work, or is it only one modality of generation from which the work can emerge? Amongst the most visible of the probable modalities of creation is the agency conferred through automated systems. We are familiar with robots in industry and computers all about us. We accept that our tele-visual and cinematic worlds are commonly mediated by synthetically generated or hybrid representations. The Golem figure of Jewish myth is transposed into the computer generated Golem of the Lord of the Rings film, one part human (the movement part acquired through motion capture of an actual human actor) and the rest computer visualisation. This binary identity could be seen to confuse our argument, the synthetic "flesh" and "bone" of the Golem character animated through the agency of human intent and action, if it were not the case that many of the representations and characters we perceive or interact with, in film, video and computer games, are largely synthetic in their composition. It is also the case that many such "avatars" are also synthetic in their genesis, created automatically, as required, by the same software systems that visualise and animate them. Here agency is clearly not of the human, or supra-human, but of the machine. Creation is no longer, if it ever was,

primarily a gift of the human.

However, to assume that the machine has some special characteristics that allow it to assume this role, or for us to assign agency to it, is to miss the point. It is not the machine that is the source of agency, no more than the human is its exclusive source. Although, historically, philosophers have sought to understand agency in relation to supra-human and human origins this is not where it has lain. Rather, agency and creativity are not the function of people, nor even communities of people, although individuals and communities can evoke and embody such agency, but of the relations between things - things that can be of diverse origins and character.

What happens to the readers of works of expanded agency? To what degree are the readers and the works mutually reflexive nodes in the creative network or field? If readers are also agents in the network of relations around the work is it reasonable to regard them as rhizome like nodes or threads within that network, compelling us to adopt a Deleuzian apprehension of creativity and its origins? If so how does this effect reading and our sense of self as reader?

Authenticity and originality

Notions of authenticity and originality have been widely contested. Barthes argued that the text and its author need not be co-related and that the reader's comprehension of the text was possibly the more important element in considering the 'authoring' and thus the origins of the work (Barthes 1978). Whilst this is a valuable contention that permits insight into how artifacts and texts might come into being and be understood, in context, it does not facilitate an approach to the subject that might allow an unpacking of the complex set of relationships around a creative work within a view that could accommodate a concept of expanded agency.

Reader Reception Theory situates our apprehension of the work within the processes of reading, contextualising and rendering interpretation as contingent upon an understanding of the reader, thus further shifting the balance of authorship from author to reader (Jauss 1982). Other approaches to the question of authorship can be found within the field of Social Epistemology (Fuller 1988), following on from Foucault's view of

knowledge as socially contingent and ultimately of variable status, dependent on the discursive and epistemic formation of the social domain a defined knowledge system operates within (Foucault 1970).

The work of the Australian artist and writer Mez Breeze makes an interesting example here. Its proto-private use of language, employing forking hermeneutic avenues embedded within one another, in recursive Borgesian knots, suggests an approach to language that contests and illuminates the manner in which Foucault regards knowledge and information as social dynamics. What happens to the reader's sense of the text and their own relation with it when they are uncertain whether they are understanding the language the author is employing, much less feel confident they are constructing a coherent reading that might come into play against that of the author's writing/reading? Where does the reader situate agency in relation to such texts? How does the reader situate themselves in relation to the domain to which the text appears to belong?

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text by Mez Breeze, 2009

Breeze's works exist somewhere between language and code. Their basic structure this textual and possibly best regarded as a poem but such texts would not sit comfortably with many definitions of what a poem can be, closely resembling pieces of executable code or computer programming functions. In the above text the first section begins with the term "start", a common command in various computer languages, denoting the beginning of a piece of code with a definable functionality, followed by what could be interpreted as a line of text declaring a number of variables to be used in the following

function. The next section of the text starts with the term "run", explicitly evoking the idea of executable code. When programmers execute their code they speak of "running" it. In what sense is Breeze using the term? Is this meant to be executable code? If so then the machine that could run it is not like most computers. It would seem safest to assume the platform and operating system this piece of code is destined for is of the reader's mind, an imaginary machine the reader is required to construct in order to interpret the text.

Here Breeze could be proposing that all the texts we read involve the reader constructing a virtual machine in order for the text to be interpreted. That is to say, each act of reading requires that we create an instance of language as a process of interpretation, with some texts demanding more ingenious and novel design than others. Such texts, demanding the reader construct something that for many is perceived as a given, something they learned as a child, forces them to reconsider what it is to read and to recognise that within reading's processes the reader is engaged in an act of imagination incorporating a constant reimagining of language. In the case of a text, like the one above, is a knowledge of computer programming likely to enhance our appreciation of the work? Is Breeze's poetic code primarily intended for the hacker and coder? Or is this incidental? One thing that does stand out is that the text seems to question its own agency. If it is executable, even if only by an imaginary machine, then is the latent agency that might be released at the moment of reading the text something that is inherently automatic, the text being executable and thus potentially self-reading and self-realisable. Is this writing that writes itself? If so then its agency is deeply problematised, shifting relations between writer, reader and text.

Umberto Eco proposed the open work of art (Eco 1989), arguing that no artwork is ever complete, being continually open to change through processes of interpretation and contextualisation. In this view all art can be considered intrinsically participatory and, to some extent, collective in its authorship.

Mez Breeze's work, always seeming to be in the process of changing, of executing itself, remains fluid and open and thus evokes Eco's concept of the open work in an explicit manner. However, whereas some artist's and author's work is materially dynamic Breeze's does exist as a fixed text. It is just at the moment of reading that its multi-

threaded and interwoven structure, within a progressively contingent form, becomes evident, its static material state emphasising its latent dynamism and openness. Breeze's texts are designed as codes to be run, but only within the context of the virtual machine the reader imagines in order to untangle the potential texts that arise from any reading. Breeze's intent becomes clear as she reveals the reader's own role in constructing a linguistic platform, or "interpreter" (another term from computer programming, denoting a piece of software which can interpret code and execute it), with which they can produce an interpretation. The reader is forced to observe the processes by which the text is realised, in their imagination, as they are disallowed any opportunity to rely upon many of the conventional forms of words and texts informing the meaning. That every reading requires several parallel texts to be kept in play, at the same time, functions to reveal the multi-dimensional nature of the mental construct the reader must sustain, and how this construct has to be able to change orientation, in order to account for the multiple legible texts any one reading might evoke.

Breeze's work can therefore be understood as self-reflexive and demanding of a similar reflexivity from the reader. The question therefore arises whether all texts have within them this property, with Breeze's texts particularly explicit examples. It could be argued that creative works exist within and of a field of social engagement, the space of reading and writing, which is itself reflexive. That is, creativity can be considered as both the outcome of social relations and the stuff that enables those relations to be. Further to this, this argument can be proposed within an expanded field of what a social network or community might be, accepting Latour's proposition of expanded agency, including, within the warp and weft of such networks, not only individual people but also the devices and systems that function to facilitate and augment the dynamic such creative communities are constituted as. Within this understanding of creative communities classic social constitutions, such as neighborhood relationships or familial structures, can be considered as of equal relevance to virtually constituted communities in online environments, such as Second Life, or the Twitterer and their followers – noting that the followed Twitterer will likely be following one or more of their followers in a reflexive, discursive and virtual social dance of plastic form. It might be observed that much of the creative value generated, the object of contemplation or excitement, is not associated with the followed, or even the follower, but the ever changing patterns and shapes inscribed by the dynamically evolving social relations enacted in the Twitter environment.

This is an automatic social technology at work, emergent properties arising from its dynamic form.

Networks as agency

As has already been observed, we can consider creativity and knowledge formation as forms of social interaction rather than the outcomes of social activities. Creative social interaction occurs in communities that develop and evolve as cultural paradigms crystallise or dissipate. This is most probably a reflexive process involving complex interactions of agency. Particular creative communities can act as a lens through which social change may be observed. Examples from networked culture, in addition to those previously described, include large scale communities of dispersed interests such as Facebook and specialist communities with finely focused interests, such as the community of creative practitioners, working with networked technologies, associated with Rhizome (Rhizome 2009).

Thus, whilst we commonly perceive creativity as the product of the individual artist, or creative ensemble, from this perspective creativity can also be considered an emergent phenomenon of communities, driving change and facilitating individual or ensemble creativity. Creativity can be a performative activity released when engaged through and by a community. Thus creativity can be understood as a process of interaction.

In this context the model of the solitary artist, producing artifacts that embody creativity, can be questioned as an ideal for achieving creative outcomes. Instead, creativity can be proposed as an activity of exchange that enables (creates) people and communities, regarding these elements as aspects of agency within an expanded field of what agency can be considered to be. Anthropologist James Leach, in his book Creative Land (2003), observes and describes cultural practices where the creation of new things, and the ritualised forms of exchange enacted around them, function to "create" individuals and bind them in social groups, thus "creating" the community they inhabit. Leach's argument is an interesting take on the concept of the gift-economy. Given this understanding, it is possible to conceive of creativity as emergent from and innate to the interactions of people. Such an understanding can combat an instrumentalist views of creativity, as often promoted by governments and corporations who demand of artists that their

creations have social (eg: "economic") value. In the argument proposed here, creativity is not valued as arising from a perceived need, a particular solution or product, nor from a supply-side "blue skies" ideal, but as an emergent property of communities.

Complicating this field of fluid relations further are the implications of what happens when forms of agency are incorporated into the network of relations that underpin creative activity which are artificial systems or artifacts in their own right. As has already been noted, networks of agency can, and often do, include non-human agents in their constitution.

In this context we can again ask what "creativity" is? We can seek to situate it as an activity defined by and defining of communities, transcending the debate on the instrumentality of creativity and knowledge and situating innovation as an ontological factor in the formation of communities. An analysis of creativity as a performative is possible. This approach allows for the deconstruction of traditional perceptions of creative activities and the development of a less reductive understanding of its value. This leads directly to fundamental questions regarding the public value of creativity and the role it plays in creating communities - with creativity proposed as a process of becoming for individuals and communities, where immanence can be regarded as interaction between various agents leading to the realisation of self through the exchange of symbolic value. The intention here is not to evoke the Deleuzian abstraction of a "plane of immanence" but to socially situate self and other within the play of relationships between individuals and communities, with the role of creativity thus emerging as an ontological determiner. The cultural economies described by Leach are the more relevant examples.

The collaborative web based artwork Megafone (2009), by the Spanish artist Antoni Abad and Mexican artist Eugenio Tisselli, explicitly engages the dynamics of individual and collective immanence. The stated aim of the project is simple - to give a voice to those who normally exist at the margins of society. However, the means by which this is achieved, employing multimedia network and mobile communication technologies to situate individual and collective identity within specific and diverse geo-cultural contexts, ensures that the work goes beyond its stated objective to become a meditation upon the performative potential of communications technologies in the becoming of individuals

and communities within a globalised cultural economy.

The work involves the artists travelling to meet with and, to a degree, embed themselves within particular communities, whether they be sex workers in Madrid, motorcycle couriers in Sao Paulo or Sahrawi refugees in the Algerian Sahara. Integrating aspects of Google Earth, image and video uploading capabilities familiar from social technology websites such as Flickr and YouTube, ethnographic media recording methods, meta-tagging and the World Wide Web as the primary means of realisation and diffusion, the artists have facilitated a series of intimate views of the lives and experiences of the communities and individuals they have worked with. The voices we hear and the images we see are those of the participating individuals. Those involved record their own video and sound files, make their own photographs documenting their lives, selecting what they upload, tagging files with related information and determining how they link together, ensuring that the artists, whilst the initiators and facilitators of the projects, remain in the background, their authorial eye distanced and muted by the direct engagement of the participants. What emerges are individual and collective vocabularies which converge as folksonomies and allow their stories to unfold from within (Tisselli 2008). This simple strategy functions to defer the potential for the voyeuristic gaze to impose itself upon the participants, who at no time emerge as the subjects of the work but clearly retain their identities and authorial stature throughout all the material associated with what are by necessity somewhat sprawling database-like artifacts.

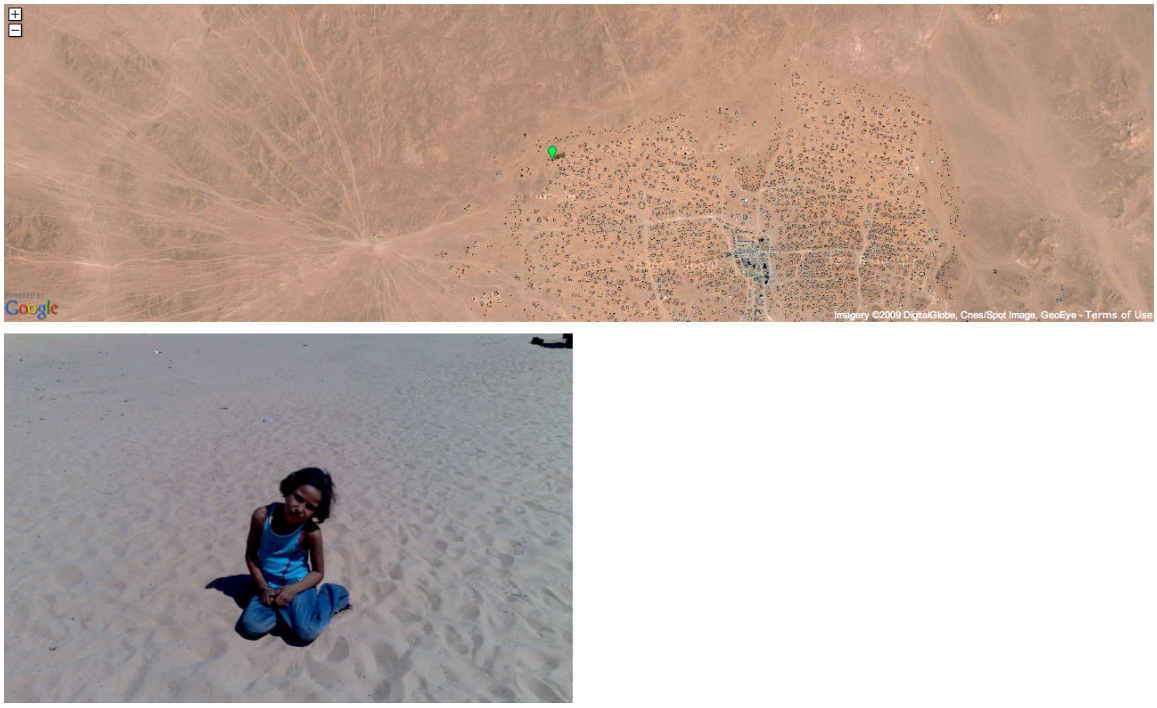
Such an approach to the projects realised within Megafone allows multifaceted documents of communities and their individual members to emerge which fit well in relation to recent ethnographic documentary film-making but also situates itself as networked artifact. The multi-layered means by which the data can be navigated, through following the communications of specific individuals or thematically defined threads or by geographic relationships, encourages a rhizomic apprehension of how people communicate, represent themselves and situate each other relative to one another. In this respect the work goes beyond the general aim of ethnographic film-making, seeking to give voice to the subject, and additionally focuses attention not on the individual voices following on from one another, constrained within the linear medium that is film, but rather the complex inter-relationships the possessors of these voices have and how it is in these relationships that they and their community are forged. The

various recordings we encounter in this work are not only the outcome of individuals seeking to present us with their experiences and reflections but evidence of the economy of signs that exist within the particular community and which are the means through which that collective experience presents as shared information and brings itself into being in the communicative.

Although Megafone, as we experience it online, is not the outcome of the careful consideration we are familiar with in conventional artistic methodologies, such as a well-crafted composition or well-judged framing of a photograph, nevertheless conjunctions of material emerge from the database of images, videos and audio recordings that are as striking and poignant as the most carefully considered photo-journalistic image. This could be taken as evidence that many of the emotions we associate with experiencing the outcomes of creative activity, such as beauty, awe, the abject or fear, are not the preserve of individual artistic intent but rather the consequence of creativity in any form, whether manifest as directed collective activity or emergent from complex social interactions and representations. In this sense creativity can be regarded not only as the outcome of normal and everyday non-privileged human activity but as the default state of human interaction and experience.

One particular page that can be generated when viewing the Megafone website, in a section created by a group of Algerian refugees, and which can only be generated through the selection of particular and perhaps unrepeatable navigational choices, results in the image of a lone child sitting in a relaxed pose upon the desert sand. Co-located on the page with this image is what we can assume is a Google Earth image indicating the child's location at the margins of a large sprawling refugee camp, itself lost in the empty expanse of the Saharan desert, scarred with the fine tracery of human activity. Whilst these images are the outcomes of human (inter)actions their co-location is the result of an automated system that has searched a database to assemble the final webpage. The Google Earth image is also the product of an automated apparatus located at a great distance to the subject, the framing and cropping a further byproduct of automated processes. This conjunction of automatic and distancing processes nevertheless lead us to a poignant composition that speaks volumes about the predicament of this child and the community to which they belong and would seem to present, through a profound economy of means, the summary intent of the Megafone

project, addressing as it does the socially marginalised within a global context. This outcome is not an accident but nor could it have been foreseen by either the participants or the facilitating artists. It is an emergent consequence from within a complex set of social and automatic interactions and, as such, an example of networked agency.



screen grab of webpage produced from database whilst navigating Megafone website

Conclusion

The intention here has been to look at a number of key factors in how creativity and its outcomes function within communities, accepting that individuals, collectives, social networks and automated systems all need to be part of the analysis. The objective has not been to define, isolate and address each of these as forms of distinct agency but rather to seek an apprehension of the dynamics involved in creativity and creation as an interplay of all these, and other, factors. The key argument has been that it is in the complex interactions of numerous elements that a pattern can be seen to emerge that could be considered not only as the agent of creation but also as the creative outcome itself. In this context it is proposed that the artifact, or whatever the commonly accepted outcome of a creative process is, is not the embodiment or final expression of creativity but rather an incidental by-product of a process that is itself the creation and creative

agency - a process that remains persistently open in its dynamic.

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