

Binary Relics

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Short statement on your current practice

With no set field of practice last year, I settled upon using 'shipping containers' to define some constraints for a field of artistic exploration. I produced 2 pieces within this area:-

- i. The Shipping Container Project; a system for sending digital data in the context of container shipping, such that a file would take perhaps 6 weeks to arrive at it's destination.
- ii. Invisible Architecture; a piece based around a system for combining packets of digital data in different ways based on the physical arrangement of a series of blocks.

Following on from these 2 projects, I wanted to understand the motivation behind the choice of shipping containers as the artificial constraint that I had chosen to work within. This process lead me to the realization that my interest in these enormous steel crates, actually comes from a penchant for boxes; furthermore it became apparent that the nature of boxes, at least within the remit of my exploration was as both containers of objects of meaning and as objects of meaning themselves.

Thus we arrive at the evocative object - an object with which we imbue meaning or significance - a relic.

relic ^{l'relik}

noun

an object surviving from an earlier time, esp. one of historical or sentimental interest.

· a part of a deceased holy person's body or belongings kept as an object of reverence.

· an object, custom, or belief that has survived from an earlier time but is now outmoded : *individualized computer programming and time-sharing would become expensive relics.*

· (**relics**) all that is left of something : *relics of a lost civilization.*

By way of beginning to explore this subject, I created a piece called The Arphid Altar; in essence a means of embedding a representation of an object's narrative of significance into the object itself and providing a mechanism for retrplaying that representation back. The piece sought to make evident the relationship between a physical object and its connotations within our own history.

Perhaps the natural extrapolation of the Arphid Altar, as an investigation into how a hybrid physical / digital object could demonstrate 'the object' as signifier, and one which roots it in a historical theoretical framework, would be to question whether a *digital* artifact can act in the same way. In the same way as Walter Benjamin examined the *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, **Binary Relics** seeks to explore the relic or evocative object, in the age of digital reproduction.

Although the piece will be executed using technology, the motivation is within the theoretical tradition of a philosophical enquiry, and would thus be more aligned to an MA rather than an MSc, and would suggest that the written and practical elements would be of equal proportion.

Benjamin's *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, and reinterpretations of that essay in the context of the digital domain, will provide a historical backdrop to my thesis, entitled **The Evocative Object in the Age of Digital Reproduction**, which will focus on the question of *whether it is possible to have a purely digital 'evocative object', or is the authenticity and thus 'aura' of the object essential to its ability to be 'evocative'? Can a relic be a binary?*

I will examine the comparison between my own hybrid relics in *Arphid Altar* and Bruce Sterling's 'spimes', from his book *Shaping Things*¹ and whether the nature of a spime as data collector diminishes or enhances the narrative, or whether an object requires some anonymity in order to allow us to impose our own thoughts, feelings and stories onto that object. I will argue how that question runs parallels to the tension between personal collecting and institutional curating.

The similarity between mass produced objects which may become a signifier of meaning for an individual, and the concept of 'objects' in object oriented programming with individual 'instances' created from generic 'classes', may provide further insight into the nature of the authentic object but also possible avenues for imagining what form a digital evocative object might take.

Through these strands and by looking at examples of relics from *Evocative Objects*² and *Taking Things Seriously*³ and the sociological study of material culture, I intend to tease out a hypothesis in answer to my research question.

In juxtaposition to this hypothesis, the practical component of my research will examine the same question by undertaking the creation of digital relics.

Description of proposed project

The project is envisaged as an adaptive system which uses internal media and external data feeds (including environmental data) to create digital relics. The concept is to create a system that generates totally unique digital objects; objects that mirror the traces or impressions of a connected network of thoughts or experiences:- e.g. memories. These traces will be created by the intermingling of the available source materials, and will, whilst the application is running, be continuously created, degrade and be deleted with no user interaction.

¹ Bruce Sterling, *Shaping Things*, 2005, MIT Press

² Sherry Turke, *Evocative Objects*, 2007, MIT Press

³ J Glenn, *Taking Things Seriously*, 2007, Princeton Architectural Press

A user interaction layer will be provided to interface with the objects, allowing for the retrieval of the current state of any given object, and to add extra data for the application to draw from. This layer will allow the user to choose from the available objects currently in the system and view the story created by that object at that moment. The recall of personal history is influenced by the situation in which the story is being told.

In the Arphid Altar, the 'memories' were recorded representations of an individual's story, where related to an object of significance. The Altar was acting merely as a repository for those stories to be retrieved at will. In Binary Relics, the narratives themselves are being created intrinsically linked to the objects; one cannot exist without the other - outside of that, there is only a subjective recall of a window into that story.

The project is envisaged as almost entirely online as a web service running on a remote server, but including online feeds from environmental sensors. It is using the black box paradigm of object oriented programming where the internal workings of the system are not revealed, but an API is provided to 'get' or 'set' properties of the object.

The main application will be written in ActionScript 3, using the Flex environment, and will run on an Apple XServe server based in a data-centre. It will provide an xml based web service allowing for the deployment of simple user interaction web applications, again developed using AS3 in Flex, which can be accessed online via a web browser.

Although the local media will be stored in a database, the objects created by the system will only ever reside in memory. Particular care will be needed to ensure that the rate of creation, degradation and destroying of the objects is balanced such that the memory usage of the application remains within acceptable limits.

The application will be developed over the months of June through September with a live date TBC in September. Should a physical application be required (such as for a show) I would envisage a touch screen projection, however this would be undertaken as a separate entity to the main project.

Initial Bibliography:

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