

Hegelian Buddhist Hypertextual Media Inhabitation or Criticism in the Age of Electronic Immersion

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Our moment has absorbed the linguistic turn of modern epistemology, to move now into a pictorial turn. . . . The challenge to the disciplines of Arts and Letters is to invent or design the practice of this syncretic writing. . . . The basic reality of the pictorial turn is that the site of invention of the next stage in the evolution of writing is taking place within the institution of entertainment. . . . Unfortunately the media literacy movement still formulates this moment almost exclusively in terms of literacy, wanting to make citizens more critical of what they consume in the media. (Gregory Ulmer)¹

We know the gamers. The teenager hunched over the controller jumps, weaves, and kicks Super Mario through the palace and on to a new level, or blasts his way through the Doom asteroid, or lingers silently with the *Myst* moods and puzzles. He's immersed in the game.

We know the critics. The New York Times. Siskel and Ebert thumbs up or down. Academics writing about novels. Plato banishing the poets. The critic stands apart from the game and issues judgments.

The critics condemn the gamers. Get a life. Get some art. But in the media age will criticism (or art) survive?

Art has been under pressure from economic and cultural normalizers throughout its history. In this century, it has been attacked by artists themselves. Duchamp, Warhol, the avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes have been joined by philosophers and social theorists in questioning or transgressing the categories of high art. The institution of

¹ Gregory Ulmer, "A Response to *Twelve Blue* by Michael Joyce," *Postmodern Culture*, Autumn 1997, sections 13-14. Ulmer raises issues related to those I discuss here in his "The Object of Post-Criticism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: The Bay Press, 1983). I would like to thank Mark Bernstein, Charles Ess, Simon Buckingham Shum, and Gregory Ulmer for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay, and I thank Stuart Moulthrop and Nancy Kaplan for the inspiration provided by their essay "They Became What They Beheld: The Futility of Resistance in the Space of Electronic Writing," referenced in note 26.

criticism has scarcely fared better at their hands, even as they stake out critical positions.

Art and criticism continue. Art institutions are going strong and are ever more efficiently administered--not an altogether happy situation. In the culture industry we distinguish dinnerware from ceramic art, illustration from painting, and soon mundane from artistic virtual worlds. Such distinctions add market value and class identification. They may even have intellectual content. But art has difficulties even wanting to maintain distinctions in the media age.

As for criticism, it is often reduced to either information or showbiz. In the clamor of the media, do we need critical standards to decide where to spend our time? We certainly need information, since attention and time are scarce resources to be distributed wisely. Where once the tragedy festival, the cathedral, or the nobility's display provided a focus for attention, we have an oversupply of proffered foci. Our communities are not so local nor so homogeneous as before. Which cathedral or opera or painting or cultural event will we involve ourselves with this week? There is no one center that gathers "us" and "our" art. So we have lists that tell what events, objects, experiences--what communities--we can expose ourselves to. Beyond *TV Guide* waits *The New Yorker*, which lists and judges, and then *The Nation* and *The New Criterion* and many others that only judge. Such voices often distinguish between proffered experiences that fit smoothly into an audience's values and expectations, and those that oppose or challenge them. That may be taken as a reason to avoid or to embrace the experiences.

I wonder about criticism directed at immersive cultural artifacts. This awkward term is meant to gather those creations that open an explorable sensory context. Immersive artifacts encourage us to ignore "outside" stimuli while we explore an offered environment. This might be a computer game, or a virtual world, or a MUD, or a chat environment with a distinctive graphic atmosphere and self avatars. We are beginning to build such artifacts, and the science fiction dream of lifelike immersion will eventually come true.

Tonight, like every night for the past eight months, tens of thousands of players will log on to Brittania, a fictional online universe. They'll come to embroider upon make believe lives as healers, fighters, mages, and rogues. And they'll stay--up to four hours each--because of the seductive quality of pure immersion. . . . On some nights, more than 14,000 players are logged on at once. More than half of them log on every day. . . . The towns, forests, and dungeons of Brittania are more than just intricately rendered; details are meaningful--you can pick up and read a book on the

library shelf or play a game of checkers in the tavern. . . . Britannia occupies some 32,000 screens, with 15 major cities, 9 shrines, 7 dungeons, and vast stretches of uncharted wilderness. As more and more players put down roots, the landscape . . . changes accordingly.²

While such computer-aided environments are the most obvious case, there are many other immersive artifacts. A less interactive immersion is already available with films and TV, the latter perhaps offering linked constellations of mini-worlds prefigured in the alliances among cable channels. But high tech is not the only way to create immersion. Live action role playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, or *Assassin* and other extended games played by college students, use everyday objects and spaces and their players' imagination to immerse their participants in jointly maintained fictions. Series of books and TV programs may create a world that is returned to and incites further exploration. In the media rush, some immersive artifacts become brand names: *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, or Disney stories. These sell repetitions of themselves. But an immersive artifact is more than a brand name; it offers a world with room to move about. Technology can enable that exploration in real time, often in the company of other participants.³

Such worlds assert themselves as relative totalities; yet they are part of our temporal experience of many worlds, and part of the net that is coming into being. Whether we think in terms of a walled-off world or a linked net of worlds they cause problems for criticism.⁴

From Plato's attack on the Sophists down to postmodern complaints about consumer culture, critics have worried about the power of rhetoric and image to mold beliefs and values while suppressing critical examination. Immersive artifacts may manipulate people even more thoroughly, shutting out the critical voice and keeping their inhabitants busy with no time to think. To combat this danger, where should the critic stand, and how will the critical voice be heard? Or is the critic's only choice to stand and speak?

² Amy Jo Kim, "Killers Have More Fun," *Wired*, May 1998, 141-143. Kim goes on to discuss problems with the culture that has evolved in this immersive environment, *Ultima Online*.

³ Janet H. Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (New York: Free Press, 1997) offers a useful survey of current and possible future immersive artifacts (chapters 2 and 9) together with remarks on the psychology of immersion (chapter 4).

⁴ The open net and the enclosed world seem opposed, but enclosure is an effect created in the net. There will be connections even when there are no explicit links, as happens now with search engines.

Traditional criticism locates itself at a distance, immune to manipulation because based in clear principles derived outside the images or artifacts being criticized. Often the critic seeks to disengage from the object a set of propositions that can be attacked with the tools of logic and argument. But criticism of art and imagery that reduces them to implicit arguments or networks of beliefs has never been very successful. Try extracting the content of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Michelangelo's *David* into argumentative form. Nor is such criticism adequate for today. The media influence us on many levels only some of which are amenable to argumentative treatment.

Yet in our age of imagery run riot, there has been a reversal that would have surprised Plato and Socrates. Rather than remaining the object of distanced criticism, art in this century has itself developed explicit strategies for questioning attitudes and cultural power. Often these artistic strategies involve the collaged juxtaposition of abruptly discontinuous fragments of imagery or belief systems, violating the borders of cultural spheres. Both the heightening of boundaries and the erasure of boundaries become critical tools within art. Other recent art highlights the multiplicity behind apparent unities. The critical strategies I suggest in the text resemble these artistic moves.

Distanced critical analysis does not work so well with immersive artifacts. Traditional criticism does not easily reach their participants. This might not seem important to people used to consulting authorities located in separated critical forums, but it is not enough to have distanced analysis going on in its own enclave for its own specialized audience. How do participants-consumers of immersive artifacts become more self-aware and make more nuanced judgments than turning off the tube or modem? This will not happen by increasing the readership of separated critical forums.

Nor is it likely to happen by inserting traditional critics into the nets or the immersive worlds. If you want to do critical discussion where the people are--criticism of television on television, or of hypertext in hypertext, or of a virtual world in the virtual world--you find that immersive artifacts surround distance and use it for effect. Traditional criticism frames itself as distinct from its framed object of analysis. But frames have become items within the flow rather than borders around the fray.

The critic becomes part of the show. The expert's arguments become something to be enjoyed--the more passionate the better. The spectators view the game, but their allegiances need not be questioned. Standard critical stances and tools are co-opted. In an age of link buttons and of webs without edges even separated critical forums can

become one more channel in the media show.⁵

This is an extreme version of a perennial problem. Socrates tried and failed to make people distinguish him from the Sophists; he saw himself as a critic of performances; they saw him as another dangerous performer.⁶ Immersive cultural artifacts make this situation worse because they segment the common place of public meeting and discussion, fragmenting the agora where Socrates once could encounter any citizen. Critical efforts to establish an authoritative meta-agora above the fragmentation produce just one more place to visit.

So, where does the critic stand? Does the critic stand? Or move? The critic can get lost in the funhouse, immersed in the artifact and playing by its rules, or the critic can wander lost on the web, or the critic can stay distanced wielding outside principles and norms. These options do not seem quite right. Can the immersed inhabitant truly judge? Can the wandering critic be heard? Can the outside critic really know what is being judged? A common solution is the anthropologist participant-observer-critic who enters an artifact or joins the net armed with insights and principles from an outside framework. This critic then distributes judgments. Such outside judgment remains important for many purposes, but I am seeking other modes of critical interaction.

Traditional critics bring to their task principles formulated outside the language of the work being criticized. Such principles might concern the nature of art or of culture and discourse. They might concern goals to which our creations should be subordinated. They might be principles of form. To apply such principles to a cultural artifact, the critic reformulates or redescribes the artifact in terms that will connect it with the principles. Formalist critics redescribe the object in relation to ideal standards. Other critics might reformulate the artifact in a narrative about earlier masterpieces, or about ongoing themes, or about class struggle or gender domination. One might judge that a video game reinforces sexual stereotypes or an immersive world pushes the values of consumption. But I want to suggest other critical modes that can operate inside the immersive artifacts and on the nets. These other modes do not stand and pass

⁵ A critic appearing on a TV program may establish her celebrity more than her critical authority. While an audience may come to trust some celebrities as sources of beliefs and values, this does not follow immediately from the intensity or the location of their performance.

⁶ Socrates wanted centered people to stand aside from the civic fray and be open to argumentative questioning. The Sophists wanted to control the civic fray by manipulating its uncentered multiplicity of desires. In the rhetorical melee, Socrates' attempt to establish a distanced critical dialogue was seen as just one more partisan cabal.

judgment.⁷

There are critical modes of inhabiting that do not reformulate the language of the artifact. They stay within its language and rules and find there spaces for critical interventions. This is possible because these modes do not accept a presupposition which lies behind both the fear of uncritical immersion and the desire to establish critical distance. Both presuppose *the control of meaning*. In this phrase the "of" should be understood both as the critic's ability to frame a stable meaning to be studied, and the meaning's ability to control a world's inhabitants by surrounding them in a seamless whole. Both presume that meanings can be woven into a single tight simply located unity.⁸ If we question this unity or its stability, then inhabitation cannot be a simple submission; it will have its distancings and porosities. Modes of criticism can live within these transitions and distensions rather than on secure meta-platforms.⁹

One such critical inhabitation is familiar enough. The image of the teenage boy immersed in a video game gives way to the image of the teenage hacker finding ways to manipulate a computer game. But he doesn't need to be a professed hacker; there are books available that give him solutions to the *Myst* puzzles. There are utility programs that let him enjoy the thrill of the game and also beat or change its rules. MUD wizards

⁷ The modes of critical inhabitation outlined below do involve judgment in the sense that their attitudes and moves could be formulated in propositions that would involve evaluations. But the critical moves do not consist in the power-full enunciation of those propositions. Nor are those propositions based on the critic's immersion in some other world taken as a critical base.

⁸ The phrase "simply located" derives from Alfred North Whitehead's discussion of the "fallacy of simple location" (See *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 157-158.) Whitehead criticizes philosophies that take qualities and things as firmly located in one separate location in a spatio-temporal whole composed of such immediate next-to's. However one evaluates Whitehead's ideas regarding physical space, I want to apply them analogously to meaning: there is no simple location in logical space.

⁹ This is relevant to worries about the possible totalitarian effects of immersive artifacts. Such experiences can weaken critical and emotional distance, opening the user to manipulation. I want to argue, though, that meta-discussion and distance are not the only critical tools. The impossibility of complete closure or control of meaning opens other modes of critical inhabitation. The issues of memory and attention raised later in the text are important in this regard. In addition, no matter how immersive they may be, immersive artifacts occupy only a portion of one's time. Perhaps a greater worry should be the monotone experience created when a sub-community tries to color all accesses-- newspapers, radio stations, music, magazines, books, films, as well as games--all with a party line. These are situations where criticism by reformulation in a larger framework may be very helpful, but they are also open to the kinds of critical interventions discussed in this essay.

embody this doubled inhabitation. They live in the MUD as both its participants and as its software engineers. This doubled role is a way of being inside the artifact. Even when they are involved with issues of code and scripting, they are not so much alternating being inside and outside the game, as they are inside in a way such that the two aspects of that inhabitation feed off each other: programming the MUD by itself would not be so fascinating if one did not also have a role in the virtual world, and the role becomes more vivid as one gains power over the world's infrastructure.

Even passive media such as TV can stimulate such doubling: *Soap Opera Digest* offers its readers both a deeper immersion in the plots and a sense of being behind the scenes examining the production process. The passive media can open very actively shared areas: Star Trek shows and movies give birth to fan-authored magazines and get-togethers that offer further explorations of the shared world, looks behind-the-scenes, and a chance to create one's own story variations.¹⁰

This kind of manipulative involvement allows you to criticize an immersive artifact within its own parameters. You need not redescribe the artifact's rules and qualities in some distanced critical discourse. Having power within the world you can make it be more what it already wants to be. Or you can bend it gradually towards what you want it to be. The will to power is strong in this mode of inhabitation. Control and self-affirmation are prized, with or without social interaction. The standard image of the teenage hacker is of a loner, but this kind of activity can also be intensely cooperative. Whether alone or social, this is not simple immersion, since the doubled roles provide built-in room for discussion about the world as you inhabit it.

While the hacker can criticize and change arbitrarily large elements, hacker

¹⁰ Fanzines create family variants of the "official" shared worlds. See the discussion of fan culture in Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 41, 85, and Gregory Benford's remarks in the "Afterword" to his *Foundation's Fear* (New York: Harper, 1997) about interaction and improvisation in genre literature (420). Recently some of the brand-name worlds, such as Star Trek, have threatened legal action against fan publications and fan web sites that produce their own variant stories and images. This stems from worries about the control of intellectual property and fears of stories at odds with the standard characterization, for instance stories about a sexual relation between Kirk and Spock. Such exploration/variation seems inevitable with shared worlds. As a publishing phenomenon it is at least as old as Cervantes varying the old romances to produce *Don Quixote*, which was followed by other authors writing unofficial continuations of the Quixote's adventures, which were followed in turn by Cervantes trumping them all by writing the second part of *Don Quixote*, where the Don meets some characters from the unofficial continuations, who then admit that he, rather than the gentleman they met in their books, is the true Don. Today's reproductive technology makes such play inevitable.

inhabitation does not easily challenge the overall teleology of the immersive artifact. But this might happen if the hacker creativity were joined with a sensitivity to the overall tenor of the immersive experience, the feeling of its life, and the powers and relations it assembles. Does participation in the artifact increase or weaken one's being? Such Deleuzian questions could direct activities as the hacker morphs into the artist, gathering experiences and adding to the assemblage of events and singularities.

Such immanent criticism can give some body to the hacker role. Deleuze's rhetoric of "lines of flight" and "nomads" suggests fleeing rather than remaking the artifact.¹¹ But in the case of digital artifacts the way they are transmitted and constantly re-copied, re-entered, and linked means that there is less difference between reforming and creating. One linked world can be a part of, and an addition to, and a criticism of, another world.

Besides the hacker, there are other modes of immanent criticism that do not necessarily intervene on the infrastructure of the immersive artifact. They motivate different activities within the artifact, or different relations across nets of artifacts, and they change one's relations in the artifact's world. Philosophically their presuppositions conflict with one another and with the Deleuzian approach.¹² It is not my purpose to settle such disputes here, but only to show that immanent criticism is a real possibility.

Immersive artifacts involve internal motions across transitions, links, and differentiated contents. Imagine a strongly temporalized inhabitation that lets those moves happen and pays minute attention to them, yet also lets their borders and connections and flows be as in-betweens but not as fixed oppositions. The attempts of one content or virtuality to define itself as total or primary or separate are taken as just

¹¹ For examples of this widespread rhetoric, see the section "Nomadology" in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹² Deleuze claims that not all definiteness comes from meaning structure and relation; this disagrees with the presuppositions of the Hegelian and perhaps the Buddhist modes discussed in the text. Deleuze's terminology suggests a campaign against structure, but he also says that "Staying stratified, organized, signified, subjected--is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which brings them back down on us heavier than ever. This is how it should be done: lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times" (*Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 160f). This quotation raises issues about the place of memory in Deleuze's theory.

that, attempts, to be noted rather than accepted or rejected. Interaction, infection, interpenetration among the contents or stages are not repressed for the sake of some tightly held identity, nor insisted upon to attack identity. Imagine a letting-be that refuses to be drawn along but does not hold back, that allows languages and movements to be themselves but, because it does not have to be identified with any particular result, is not pulled about by the unfoldings and not seized or divided in the conflicts. It is an alert seeing where things go and where they end, what feelings and experiences they create, and where the content clutches and clings and opposes and tries to be more than it can be. Such an inhabitation does not rest on any particular content or principle as a base. It is less vulnerable to manipulation and distraction because it does not grasp at any bait but only observes it as such. It is made possible by the spacing inherent in temporal experience and the open texture of meanings. Because there is no clinging to current rules and definitions this mode of inhabitation can accept influences across borders and echoes from other worlds. The artifact is not reformulated, but one refuses to be stopped at borders or to cling to official purposes.

The Buddhists have a word for this attitude: non-attachment, neither clutching nor rejecting. They have a word for the process: mindfulness. They have a word for its effect: compassion. And a word for what it leads to: skillful means.¹³

This attentive self may not seem critical enough, for it does not stand off and judge. But this mode of inhabitation criticizes, by noticing them, attempts to grasp or to divide or to force integration; it refuses to be drawn into desires for totality. It offers resistance without aversion.

Nor need non-attachment be purely contemplative. If intervention happens, it could be like the Buddha's actions told in the Jataka stories. For instance: in an earlier lifetime two future Buddhas, Maitreya and Gautama, encountered a starving tigress with her suffering cubs. Rather than fleeing the snarling beast, Maitreya set off to find food for her. This stretches the rules of the game for dealing with wild animals. But then, when he returned, Maitreya discovered that Gautama had taken a still more unusual and decisive action: he had fed himself to the hungry tigress. Such an action is outrageous according to the norms of the everyday world, and so challenges our motives and norms. The bodhisattva's action resembles that of the poet making a new

¹³ One might conceptualize non-attachment in immersive artifacts using the somewhat different notions found in the Hindu *Gita* or in Taoism. But I find most useful the links to the ideas of compassion and skillful means in the bodhisattva's activity. This Buddhist mode has many resemblances to the Deleuzian mode mentioned earlier, despite Deleuze's claim that Buddhism is a polar opposite to his own Nietzschean affirmation of life. See *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 133.

metaphor and changing language. It makes new voices audible and opens up new shapes of life. This is a different spirit than the will to power of the standard MUD wizard. It might open up the social practices in shared worlds, making people aware of new possibilities and new ways of being. This might question the normative frames within which people are acting, or repurpose their activities and change the stakes.¹⁴

There are other modes of immanent criticism that are more oriented to the detailed structure of meanings within an artifact. One such mode could be derived from Hegel. In the introduction to his *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel raises the age-old problem of the criterion: how can we find ways to criticize our self-conceptions and cultural productions when the criteria that we invoke are themselves cultural productions in need of justification by still other criteria? Hegel avoids the threatened regress by refusing the demand for foundational criteria. He suggests a process of just looking. Letting a self-conception or a cultural artifact be itself can be a way of letting its internal tensions and contradictions express themselves. We could raise questions about Hegel's theory and the necessity of the sequence of self-conceptions he presents, but his mode of criticism suggests a way to inhabit immersive cultural artifacts. Hegel would say: you don't need to import criteria from outside, because the artifact already has a built-in self-understanding and goal. Let this show its dialectical transformations and loss of self-certainty.¹⁵

Might there be a kind of self-criticism that happens when the artifact tries to be itself? The point is not that the artifact aims at some effect but falls short. Rather its goal is part of a self-conception that covertly depends on other relations not yet included within the self-conception. Falsely absolutizing its situation, a mode of living does not see its constitutive dependencies and inter-relations. When it tries to realize itself in this narrowly conceived way and world, it fails and develops an enlarged self-conception.

¹⁴ Jataka stories draw moral lessons from episodes in the previous lives of the Buddha. They depend on the cosmology of reincarnation, and in that context there are understandable motivations for the surprising actions described in the stories. But the stories can also be read independently of any foundational cosmology, as challenges to ordinary mores and motives, in the way that a surprising new art form or new kind of political association can change our landscape of possibilities. The underlying philosophical issue here is whether the surprising move must always stem from some already formed narrative or principle. It seems to me that the surprising move is often itself the discovery of such a new direction of meaning, but there can also be moves whose effect is to loosen or challenge meanings and mores without providing a formed alternative.

¹⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §§81-85.

Self-conceptions and cultural forms can reveal their connections even when they do not know them.

Hegel is more concerned with overall modes of being in the world than with the details of individual cultural artifacts. He studies the ways that cultures, religions, or artistic genres develop out of one another. But this is not wholly distinct from studying the shapes taken by shared inhabitation of virtual worlds, even those as impoverished as current computer games.

Imagine then a mode of letting-be within a space created by the self-conception and grammar and values implied in the artifact. It makes that space explicit and reveals inbuilt tensions and motions. It is alert to how the possibilities change as the self-comprehension tries to realize itself. Inhabiting an immersive artifact in this way would be to stay within the artifact's terms as they change, adding only a memory and a description of the transitions. This creates a narrative in which the current self-understanding is only one phase.

The classic over-narrative of this sort is Hegel's story about how the necessary structure of our being is the coming to self-consciousness of that necessary structure itself. But Hegel is not alone. There are more recent modes descended from Hegel that also remain with the language or system of the inhabited artifact but refuse to take that language or system as fixed or final.

One such mode of inhabitation would act in the artifact's world somewhat in the manner in which Derrida reads a text: attentive to slippages and to covert dependencies on devalued and supplementary elements. Seek the ways in which the world's unities come about as effects in a field that these unities do not dominate even though they announce themselves as doing so. The deconstructive inhabitant looks to perform gestures that put stress on the standard rules and divisions and make them show their slippages and covert dependencies. She might reuse and recombine bits of the world in unexpected ways, making unconventional moves or links that seem inappropriate but reveal hidden connections or put pressure on invisible walls.

This mode might lead to a local equivalent of what hypertext theorists have called "writing all over the interface." Items that are part of the machinery of an artifact's world (menus, lists, maps, configuration files, margins, indices, and so on) can be made part of its poetry. This brings the inhabitant up short against machinery that refuses to stay in its subordinate role, and opens it to new possibilities. For instance, in Michael Joyce's hypertext short story *Woe*, the names of the links on the maps are arranged so that they read as poems. Some of the clues in John McDaid's portrait-adventure-detective-story-world, *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse*, are to be found by viewing the

hypercard coding. In the title essay of his collection, *Writing at the Edge*, George Landow collects many transgressive and playful re-uses of what might have been only background machinery.¹⁶ In artifacts such as MUDs where the infrastructure is available, such interventions could help question and undercut the naturalness of wholes and transitions that get taken for granted even in such completely artificial environments.¹⁷

I have suggested modes of inhabitation that do not reformulate immersive artifacts into a foreign critical language. Yet in their different ways they refuse to take asserted unities and structures as final. They sense borders without getting caught in fixed oppositions. They let meanings develop and cross and criticize their prior selves. They take unities and closures and oppositions as effects within a relational network rather than as given poles and borders. They react to the overreaching built into such effects. If closure is an effect rather than a given, these modes of criticism let this be shown within the net or the artifact's own terms, rather than reformulating the artifact and subsuming it within another closure set up by exterior principles or narratives.

There are philosophical battles to be fought over the relative priorities and the possible reductions of one mode to another. I am taking no sides in such disputes here; my point is that these offer less distanced ways to have critical effects. Deciding which modes are more fundamental than others is an important task, but such a decision would not reduce them all to a single mode.

¹⁶ Michael Joyce, *Woe*, in *Writing on the Edge*, vol. 2, num. 2 (Spring 1991), on a disk included with the journal; John McDaid, *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse* (Watertown, Mass.: Eastgate Systems, 1992), on disk with audio tape and printed material; George Landow, ed., *Writing At the Edge* (Watertown, Mass.: Eastgate Systems, 1995), on disk.

¹⁷ Although I don't develop them further here, there are other possible immanent critical inhabitations. One could be developed out of the "carrying forward" described in the writings of Eugene Gendlin. See the discussions in *Language Beyond Postmodernism: Saying and Thinking in Gendlin's Philosophy*, edited by David Michael Levin (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997). Another might be formed around Paul Ricoeur's ideas about metaphor and narrative as refiguring experience and opening new spaces of possibility. See *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977, and *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988). These might be called "hermeneutic" but not with the sense of an investigation searching to uncover unified hidden meaning. They would attend to the temporal carrying forward and change of meanings, aware of the fragility of these transitions and open to ways in which the present results from previous transitions. Both these and the deconstructive approaches deny the forced choice of immersion versus distance, as well as the presupposition that meanings can be controlled. Both urge attention to the stretched-out happening of meaningful artifacts.

But what kind of effects might these have on the inhabitant-user or on the immersive artifact?¹⁸ The kinds of critical interventions depend on the degree of interactivity possible in an environment. The classic video game Pacman has one control, for the direction of movement of the player's representative on the screen. Speed and activity are not variable. Nintendo and Sega game units have controls that can vary the direction and timing of several activities. Games that allow verbal input bring more possibilities of control and intervention, as with *Adventure* and its descendants, but they can only parse simple commands. This changes when the computer becomes a medium of interpersonal interaction. MUDs and MOOs allow indefinitely many kinds of interventions. As technology for virtual reality matures there will be a similar range from passive VR rides to mutually created and modifiable virtual worlds.

Because of their relatively free sociality, MUDs and their future VR parallels offer the widest possibility for critical inhabitation. The active attention suggested above could sensitize users to dependencies and rigidities built into their world. This could change the inhabitants' stance within the world, the way they relate to other inhabitants, and eventually the rules and features of the environment itself. Deviant behavior could make points about accepted norms. Rooms could be built that open new possibilities. Conventions could be challenged verbally or by other consciousness-raising maneuvers. MOO software often contains explicit tools for enhancing debate about the structure and rules of the MOO itself.¹⁹

A jointly composed hypertext web offers analogous possibilities. For instance, I might criticize your contributions to the text not by direct argument against them, but

¹⁸ Do these modes of criticism still depend on meta-positions outside the artifacts? There is a sense in which they depend on very formal notions about the conditions of possibility for meaning and for closure effects. But such notions are not involved as premises supporting pronouncements of judgment.

¹⁹ Even when such tools are not available, people may still find ways to demand change. "A few weeks after *Ultima Online*'s release, a player named Mohdri Dragon initiated one of the game's first public displays of civil disobedience, to call attention to Origin's lax response to numerous unfixed bugs while it built new features. Hundreds of players gathered together in the capital, striped their characters naked, and stormed the castle of Lord British--a k a Richard Garriott, the real-life creator of the *Ultima* series. Once inside the castle, the players drank themselves silly, trashed Lord British's throne room, and protested loudly, much to the amusement and consternation of the game's developers. . . . The players, in other words, started to behave like citizens anywhere." (Amy Jo Kim, "Killers Have More Fun," *Wired*, May 1998, 143.)

by linking them in unexpected ways or by reusing them in an unexpected context.

When there are fewer modes of input within the artifact, or its infrastructure is not available except to the hacker, there are still critical possibilities. It may be possible to break the rules and create new behaviors, or to stimulate a metagame within the game. In a shared game there still might be occasions for bodhisattva-like or deconstructive moves that go against the teleology of the game and open up unexpected modes of sociality. Remember Gautama and the tigress. Would one really try laying down one's arms in a combat game like *Doom*? This would make little sense in the solo version, because the computer cannot acknowledge such a move, but even such solos can prompt reflection.²⁰ In a social version that allowed enough flexibility in responses, refusing to fight might challenge the players to interact in new ways. Espen Aarseth points out that shared interactive worlds are not best conceived as "games," since "Any system that must regulate its discourse by social pressure and convention rather than by clearly defined regulations is more than a game--both more real and more perilous."²¹

In cases where the artifact's structure and goals are fixed, such as *Myst* and other solo CD-ROM adventures, only the hacker mode of inhabitation can change the immersive world itself. But the other modes I discussed can change the attention of the user, who would be more aware of the structure of the world and the interplay among its parts and values. These modes emphasize how the temporality of the experience allows but overflows borders, including the borders of the game.

Solo computer games may seem far from the world of high art, but the player's concentration on the game resembles the quasi-religious attitude enjoined on us in front of approved masterpieces. Just as recent theory undermines that passive reception of art, so it could affect the consumption of immersive artifacts.

Even games that are quite limited may still offer opportunities for changes in the attitude or stance of the players. In *SimCity* the underlying algorithms are chaotic, so there is no one state that wins the game--the aim is to plan and administer a survivable city. This could lead to discussion among players about what makes a city livable. In

²⁰ Janet Murray describes a player complaining about the Clone Wars arcade game, "why should I want to kill these guys? . . . We should all be working together." (*Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 52). The story of the game involves fighting through guards to attain an alliance against a larger enemy. Murray also discusses the effect of switching sides in *Mortal Kombat*, or fighting for the evil Empire in one of the Star Wars games (147).

²¹ Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 145.

solo video arcade games one has only limited interactions against implacable opposition. But it is still possible to change one's own mode of inhabitation, which is never as simple as it might seem: consider how people play different arcade games one after another, making comparisons and judging the current state of the art.

Similar linkage effects also occur where inhabitation may appear totally passive, as in channel and web surfing.²² Even the most passive immersive artifacts, such as theme park VR rides, still offer the possibility of different awareness during the experience. That awareness need not be a constant comparison with what is outside, but could be awareness of interior relations and spacings and connections, as described above. Such more critical active attention could affect the evolving experience.

But can changes of attention really have potentially critical effects? Several objections will help clarify the issues. The first objection is that immersive media are experienced in a state of distraction. Not because we are doing something else (though some media can be used as wallpaper) but because the media are immersive, that is, they provide an environment that is richer than any single focus. The whole experience could be in a state of distraction. Think of a child in an amusement park running from thrill to thrill without ever fully attending to any one event because each is so infected with the lure of the next and with the contentless promise of even greater to come. TV and web surfing can bring this distraction either with the child's eagerness or with a desultory boredom. Such distraction increases our chances of being manipulated, since it reduces awareness of meanings or connections other than those now being fed to us. This shows how immersive technology can inhibit the attention needed by critical inhabitation.

However, the crucial issue is not distraction but forgetting. Even a distracted state can be mindfully experienced as such in the Buddhist mode, or inhabited in its transitions and demands. The real enemy of critical inhabitation is a sequence that drops its past as it goes. Although the modes of inhabitation I have suggested do not demand a meta-stance outside the artifact, they do require resolute attention to the movement and the temporality of experience. They fight forgetting and quick thrills.

Hacking gamers or MUD wizards slow down and work on the rules and infrastructure, then speed up to slalom through part of the world. There is Buddhist attention to qualities and temporal passage. There can be attention to the quality of the

²² It is worth recalling that in its original application to media the image of surfing was meant to describe balanced awareness and skilled navigation through dynamically changing conditions. The original use of "surfing" in this context is claimed to be in the essay linked from http://www.netmom.com/about/surfing_main.htm.

experience, even to its speed and distraction, if that is what is going on, as well as to the links and associations and carry-overs across the sequence. Hegelian and deconstructive modes demand more active remembering. Their attention is not as wide as in the Buddhist mode but is more focused on just those connections and transformations ignored in the quick thrill.

A second objection is almost the reverse of the first. If distraction leads to under-attention, there can also be over-attention. Immersive artifacts can get us over-focused on specific problems and goals, with no slowing down to smell the virtual roses or consider contextual structures and associations. Or the immediacy of some desired thrill or sexuality can narrow our focus to the present gratification, forgetting past developments and future consequences.

There is no avoiding the need for awareness on more dimensions than the immediate task or thrill. But it is possible to focus on the task or thrill without losing sight of its context and presuppositions, though this takes a more complex temporal rhythm. Criticism takes effort, though in this case it is not the effort of constructing a separate critical discourse. It takes advantage of the internal differentiation built into our temporal experience of meanings and activities.

A third objection comes from a different direction but has the same answer. We can be caught--the remote control and the mouse both liberate and enslave. They bring flexibility yet predefine our reach. They empower the subject to say "no" to this or that presentation even as they pin the subject within their particular network of presentations. The user can turn off the machine, but while it is connected the administrators of content will try to keep the user within their set of linked channels or sites. A cow, or a mind, can be controlled by giving it a big enough field to wander in. The fences remain.

This objection would be more powerful if we were indeed caught within a single artifact. But if the remote control and the mouse pin us within a labyrinth, it already contains multiple worlds and artifacts. That multiplicity and its border crossings can challenge pre-planned meanings and excitations. Even if there were no choice at all, that would still not forbid critical attention. John Cage composed several pieces of music in which radio stations were tuned in and out on a fixed schedule. Listeners heard segments of whatever happened to be being broadcast on those stations.²³ Cage created attention and connection. You might call his creation a kind of controlled surfing, but it encouraged a complex attention. The individual segments were heard three ways at

²³ John Cage, *Landscape no. 4 (March no. 2) for 12 radios (1951)*, and *Radio Music, for 1-8 radios (1956)*.

once: as particular sounds with their timbres and qualities, as recognizable types of programs, and as segments in Cage's work that played off one another and generated meanings across the discontinuities within the piece.

If one were to channel or web surf with such dimensions of attention, new meanings would be created by the juxtapositions even if one could not choose the elements in the series. There is no control of meaning, so even channel surfing can generate new meaning across its conflicts and contrasts. What is needed is attention within the sequence itself, rather than instant forgetting in the search for thrills.

What I have been doing, in effect, is trying to move the conception of immersive media toward the kind of attentive literacy sought for the links and crossings of hypertext. Hypertext offers more than a sequence of on-off commands with the remote. There is always linking, mixture, and memory. These can be experienced attentively without being formulated in another language.²⁴

Further technological advances will allow active linking rather than passive reception, with individual or group creation of new content. This is already beginning on the web with those millions of home pages. Imagine them becoming home worlds. Linking would become even more a mode of expression and creativity. We might have something resembling what Vannevar Bush prophesied: worlds that were trails of references, collections, critical comparisons--but all of these involving much more than just the information that was Bush's concern.²⁵ Imagine the construction of immersive collages, virtual space conceptual art installations including one another, new meta-artworks, super-Rauschenbergs using duplicative and linking technology. These would benefit from the kind of critical inhabitations I have been discussing.

With the technology available in the past hundred years, art developed the self-critical strategies already mentioned for examining its own conventions, institutions, and context. Those techniques of self-reference, collaged juxtaposition, disconnection and impertinent connection, ironic reuse could well become tools of self-expression and self-criticism on a more mundane level. Advertisements are already re-forming our

²⁴ Because the modes of critical inhabitation I have been discussing do not reformulate the immersive artifact in terms of another given discourse, but do require attention to the structure and movements within the artifact, they involve new literacy skills applied to new media. However they are not just investigative techniques for disengaging a message; their sensitivity to processes and goals includes finding ways of intervening within the overreachings and mixtures involved in establishing the artifact's unities and activities.

²⁵ An article by the politically influential science advisor Vannevar Bush is generally accepted as the first adumbration of the notion of hypertext linkage. See "As We May Think," (*Atlantic Monthly* 176 (July 1945), 101-108).

sensitivities in that direction.

You might object that it is more likely that all the links will be pre-made corporate products. I think not. But even in that worst case remember John Cage. There would still be no total control by meaning, nor control of the generation of meaning. There will always be temporal sequence, and its mixture and border crossings. There can still be critical attention to meaning beyond what is intended by the makers. So there will always be room at least for self-criticism of the user, and possibly for unexpected interventions against the grain.

The modes I have described do not do away with the need for distanced argumentative criticism. Political and cultural criticism may need to back off from immersive artifacts and reformulate them within larger narratives and critical vocabularies. But that is not the only way. Meaning cannot be controlled; it opens new possibilities inside the immersive artifact. I have suggested modes that invoke this openness of meaning and the temporality of our experience. They allow the creativity of impertinent moves. The critical sensitivities involve more than sets of propositions and their inferential connections. We will be impoverished if we envision all criticism on the model of a logical argument, or on the model of a judicial examination.

I began with two images, the gamer and the critic. Here is another: the writer creates a hypermedia novel or cyberdrama, hoping the readers will become immersed, but it is also an active hypertext, so readers are expected to add to the web. The critic enters the web and loses her meta-position, but she joins everyone in the possibility of reflection and the movements of meaning.²⁶

²⁶ The difficulties with maintaining a distanced critical stance in large hypertexts are discussed by Stuart Moulthrop and Nancy Kaplan, "They Became What They Beheld: The Futility of Resistance in the Space of Electronic Writing," in C. Selfe and S. Hilligoss, edd. *Literacy and Computers*. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1994).