

creativity.com: Aladdin's Cave or Pandora's Box?

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¹

At least as far back as classical Greek times, humankind has speculated over the complexities of creativity as a concept and the modes of its transmission (Madden 133-134). This paper considers what happens when our inherited conceptions of creativity collide with the World Wide Web. It concludes with a brief survey of the [Creativity Resource Portal](#), a current on-line project managed by the authors and related to the conceptual issues raised in the body of the text.

²

Today, creativity has moved beyond its traditional home in the rhetoric of the philosopher and the exploits of the artist to form an integral part of both the theory and practice of a myriad of disciplines. Health professionals (Dossey; Kirklin & Meakin; Meites, Bein & Shafer; Rees; Satalof), scientists (Bohn 1-3, 13-15; Culross), educators (Guilford; Sawyer; Sternberg & Williams; Wilks) and those involved in the corporate world (Forbes & Domm; Mauzy & Harriman; Robinson & Stern) all consider creativity to be a fundamental criterion by which they measure and achieve their successes.

³

In this way, however, creativity has become something of an over-burdened signifier. Now the market is flooded with highly idealised and ever expanding models for understanding and transmitting creativity, in which the medium (transmission) strives to outdo the message (creativity itself). We are not attempting here to arbitrate between these various models with a view to providing a rank order of creativity. Instead, we want to focus on and explore the ways in which recent technological developments, primarily the internet, have been, and might be, used to transmit and facilitate new directions and expressions of creativity and the creative process itself.

⁴

Although the internet has no single inventor or birth date, its origins lie in the communication system devised by the [RAND](#) corporation

in the 1960s: a system designed to survive a nuclear war because it had no central point of control. To this extent, one could say that its initial egalitarianism tips towards the expression of creativity. From here, the internet evolved through various mutations, such as APRANET and Bulletin Boards, to become the World Wide Web that emerged in the 1990s. Since then, the internet has encroached further and further into our everyday lives: we buy and sell goods at sites like [Amazon](#) or [E-bay](#), we communicate to the world via email accounts at [Hotmail](#) or [Yahoo](#), we court potential partners at [Lavalife](#) or [Okcupid](#), and we engage in scholarly debates on sites such as [M/C – Media and Culture](#). The point here is that the sheer ubiquity of the internet has brought about a quiet revolution in our everyday modes of creativity. Web navigation, for example, is heavily dependent on the creativity of the user to move through virtual space, even or perhaps especially when he/she must counter the 'point and click' inducements of advertising and marketing strategies.

5

Little wonder then that the emergence of creativity as a fundamental tenet for success across a wide array of disciplines, coupled with the pervasiveness of cyberspace, has led to an explosion of both the production and transmission of creativity on-line. One such development is the transmission and dissemination of already created products via the web: that is, products hijacked from the 'real'. In its most controversial and publicized form, the creative output of musicians has become tender for trade between individuals who subscribe to programs such as [Napster](#) and [Limewire](#). Beyond this, the internet extends ever outwards in a panoply of both solicited and pirated images and video clips of people's creative output. Here the internet seems to move beyond the liberating potential that Benjamin saw in technology's ability to reproduce the image (Benjamin) towards the simulacra (or hyper-real copies of the 'real') proposed by Baudrillard (Baudrillard).

6

On-line creativity has not, however, been limited to the reproduction of artistic output that exists in the 'real'. As with any practice fundamental to the expression of the human condition, creativity has found new and exciting ways to express itself on-line. For example, digital art has emerged as a serious artistic pursuit since the late 20th century. Here, a number of artists have fused their creative ability and their technological skills to generate new ways in which their creativity can be transmitted. A cyber-poet may meld both the classical poetic forms of stanza and rhyme with the language of HTML or Java to create a cyber-poem (see the work of

[Komninos Zervos](#)). Visual artists such as [Han Hoogerbrugge](#) have also been able to successfully adapt their works to the digital world: Hoogerbrugge converted a comic strip he wrote in the mid-1990s to a series of digital animations. As well as this, new on-line formats such as blogs have been used by a number of artists to express their creativity in new and interesting ways (see the work of [Olia Lialina](#)). Other artists have dived even further into the simulacra, preferring the aesthetic value of the code itself over the presence of images or words that might signify something in the 'real' (see this work by [Jason Nelson](#)). Unlike traditional art forms, these emerging digital art forms are intensively interactive and thereby encourage the creativity of their audience. By allowing the artistic product itself to be manipulated, digital artists facilitate new ways of 'reading' art.

7

It is tempting then to offer the internet up as something of a creative utopia – an Aladdin's Cave – a place where creativity, in all its manifestations, can be transmitted to the masses. However, in the final chapter of her book *[The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace](#)*, Margaret Wertheim discusses the notion of a 'cyber-utopia' and asks "Who is this cyber-utopia really going to be for?" (Wertheim 295). She goes on to point out that not only do the majority of the world's inhabitants not have access to the internet, but that out of those who do, many are discriminated against in the virtual world because of their gender, their sexuality, their skin colour or their ethnicity. (Of course, this does not necessarily make online space any less democratic than traditional technologies such as print forms).

8

More recently, Lawrence Lessig has taken Wertheim's questioning of cyber-utopia to its logical dystopian antithesis in his book *[Free Culture](#)*. Here, Lessig argues that the internet has had a direct impact on the way that culture is made. Specifically, the control that major media conglomerates and governments have over the internet has meant that "the ordinary ways in which individuals create and share culture fall within the reach of the regulation of the law, which has expanded to draw within its control a vast amount of culture and creativity that it never reached before" (Lessig 8). Have we therefore clicked open a Pandora's Box through our incessant attempts to get wired?

9

All technologies are open to abuse. Cyberspace is neither Aladdin's Cave nor Pandora's Box but simply a work in progress. And it is on this basis that we are currently creating an online [Creativity Resource Portal](#). This portal does not attempt to resolve immediately the many debates over the nature and transmission of

creativity, nor does it set out to completely resolve the quandaries raised by creativity's cyber manifestations. Instead, it aims, at least initially, to disseminate a broad range of knowledge about creativity – thus encouraging inter-fertilization across disciplines and practices – and also to act as a catalyst for currently unrecognized ways of creating and expressing creativity in the online world.

10

That being said, we hope that future refined manifestations of the site will possess the characteristics of a 'laboratory', in which the serious issues of creative freedom and control outlined in this paper – issues of transmission in the broadest sense – might be more directly engaged with. It is through this direct virtual engagement that we hope to reach conclusions capable of extending outwards to the wider, global online environment. This might happen via experiments with new types of non-hierarchical site structures, or with the level of control given to visitors over what happens in the site. But can any structures resist the exercise of power? Can egalitarianism (cyber or otherwise) ever fully eschew borders and margins? These are the questions that challenge and excite us as managers of the [CRP](#).

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