

novelty waves

by matt pearson

Novelty Waves

a short book about digital art

Matt Pearson

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Introduction

“Much of what I put in this book was inspired by the grotesque prices paid for works of art during the past century. Tremendous concentrations of paper wealth have made it possible for a few persons or institutions to endow certain sorts of human playfulness with inappropriate and hence distressing seriousness. I think not only of the mudpies of art, but of children’s games as well - running, jumping, catching, throwing.

Or dancing.

Or singing songs.”

Kurt Vonnegut, from his introduction to “Bluebeard” (1987)

It’s the second decade of the 21st Century. We’ve made it past the millennium. Past the end of the Mayan calendar. Past the *omega point* of Terence McKenna’s “[timewave zero](#)”¹. The world has spectacularly failed to end or collapse

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terence_McKenna#Novelty_theory

under the weight of its own complexity. We're still here. We survived. Well done us.

So ... now what?

This centrifugal moment has flung us out in a new direction. We're moving fast but with no clear idea of where we're heading. As a culture we're frantically trying to get our bearings, looking around for familiar reference points that aren't there any more. Even science fiction, the artform best suited to exploring our possible futures in the past, is now struggling to keep up with the novelty of the present. Q-Branch has given up inventing gadgets for James Bond, unable to compete with the devices in the pocket of every teenager at every bus stop. To mis-quote William Gibson; the future is already here, and it is increasingly evenly distributed.

For the first time in many decades, we have this uninterrupted stretch of time reaching out ahead. There's no horizon. No doomsday. No end times approaching. We are striding into the 21st Century with fresh confidence, at least until we've had time to agree on a new eschatology. Which won't take long I'm sure, as we've never been fond of stories without endings. But, right now, within this transitional moment, we have a unique attitude. And while we hold this pensive breath, it seems the best of our speculative fictions are to be found in the field of digital art.

The digital arts have, for many years now, been through a process of bootstrapping themselves toward credibility.

Toward popular acceptance. Within this realm we are getting our best glimpses of what comes next, from the artists best positioned to make sense of our special place in time and space. New emergent mediums abound, each novel and peculiar. Twitter consciousness. Browser détournement. Drone ballet. Generative sculpture. Multitudinous forms, sparks from the abrasion between the hairless apes and the technologies we are creating.

In forty years we might be able to look back and see the shifting trends more clearly. But some of us don't have the patience to wait that long, so *Novelty Waves* is written from the eye of the maelstrom. Simply because I wanted to carve a sliver of sense out of it for myself.

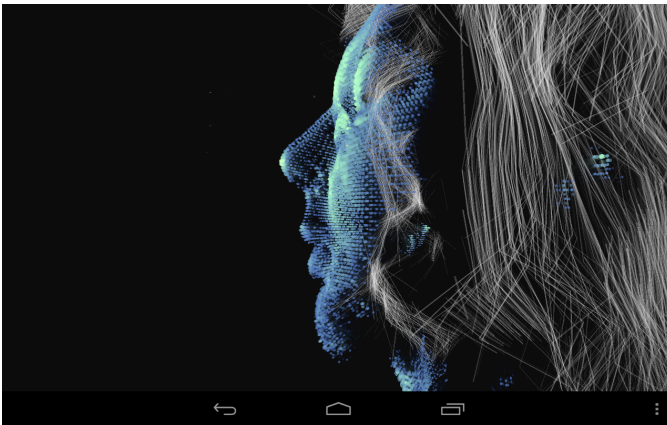
This book collects a year-or-so's worth of writing, organised in near-chronological order. I began rather cynical about the concept but, in the construction of this mottled abstract, I've edged ever closer to the conclusion that "digital art" just might be an important movement. One worthy of all the nervous attention it's getting from the artistic establishment. The order of the essays reflect this; the early chapters ask a lot of questions, while the later chapters offer more in the way of soapboxing and contentious proclamations.

The first piece, chronologically, was *Open Source Art* written for Julia Kaganskiy² of *The Creators Project*³. This essay

²<http://www.fastcompany.com/3016970/women-in-tech-2011/the-most-influential-women-in-technology-2011-julia-kaganskiy>

³<http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com>

is somewhat of a mashup; the first section reprising a short blog post from a few years back that struck a chord at the time, the rest then continuing that theme with a tale of another of my self-flagellating vanity projects, one which spoke to the heart of the Open Source debate. The project, a pretty unoriginal reworking of an old [Aaron Koblin](#)⁴ idea, is not really the topic of the chapter. It is reasoning behind the “intelligent theft” exercised in its genesis that is discussed; whether its originality matters and, ultimately, what purpose it serves.



screenshot from “Thom” (Android app)

The opening chapter, *No One Ever Cried At A Website*, came next, which I started scribbling at the back of the Dom Omladine in Belgrade whilst attending the *Resonate*

⁴<http://www.aaronkoblin.com/>

*Festival*⁵. That week I'd seen talks by Kyle MacDonald⁶, Golan Levin⁷, Evan Boehm and others, and the current state of digital art was very much on my mind.

Filip Visnjic⁸ of *Creative Applications*⁹, one of the organisers of *Resonate* and a key node in the global digital art community, had chastised me in a shouted gig conversation the night before about giving the *Open Source Art* piece to Julia, rather than him. His passive-aggressive grumpiness had somehow made me feel unjustifiably guilty so I pledged there and then, rather beered up, to write something more substantial for him. This article was the first thing I wrote. The shape of a book then began to form from that, pretty much unbidden.

The piece was also for the aforementioned Evan Boehm¹⁰ though too, who I'd finally met, bleary-eyed, on the flight back from that Serbia trip. I bounced these ideas off him in a London coffee shop shortly after. Evan has since become a good friend and has given great feedback on most of the words between these covers, so he's perhaps the closest this book has had to an editor. He's also, IMHO, a fucking great artist.

Social Networking With the Living Dead followed that. It was one I'd been writing a while, initially co-authored with

⁵<http://resonate.io>

⁶<http://kylemcdonald.net>

⁷<http://www.flong.com>

⁸<http://www.fvda.co.uk>

⁹<http://www.creativeapplications.net/>

¹⁰<http://www.peelyoureyes.com/>

[Shardcore](#)¹¹, who was my co-conspirator in the project it discussed. But the article, like June, was bustin' out all over. So at some point I made a run for it, loaded up on caffeine and hyperbolic bluster, and put my name at the bottom (with, I think, Shardcore's blessing). Filip, again, was first to publish this on *Creative Applications*.

Its companion piece, *Facebox*, came from a very different place. It was one of the more bearable examples of the occasional cathartic fictional sketches I used to post on my blog. It felt right to include it here because it succinctly precludes the imminent future implicit in *Social Networking With the Living Dead*, as well as being a prototypical exercise in the kind of "good fiction" I evangelise repeatedly in the latter half of the book.

The second fiction, *The Death of The Artist* is the longest of these chapters and, to my mind, the heart of the book. Sometimes a tricky concept can be easier to discuss by writing a story around it, and here the way the ultimate (and inevitable) automation of the artist might be absorbed into the warmly-blanketing bullshit bubble of the contemporary art world, was something I'd struggled to communicate in other ways, without it descending into an inelegant rant.

I'd sat on *TDOTA* for a while, not sure, initially, if it made the grade. But it was [John Higgs](#)¹² who restored my confidence in it. I'm lucky enough to have not one

¹¹<http://www.shardcore.org/>

¹²<http://jmrhiggs.blogspot.co.uk/>

but two genius-level writer friends in Brighton, the other being [Jeff Noon](#)¹³, whose foreword you've just read. Both John and Jeff are terrible people to be stood next to, as they make even my most laboriously crafted prose read like toilet wall scrawl. John read *TDOTA* and, despite the slapdash sci-fi stylings of this very fictional tale, got most of the way through it thinking it was simply another factual first person account of my adventures. For this and other reasons it has now become my favourite of these chapters. And if you don't agree, dear reader, I'm afraid I no longer care.

Continuing chronologically, *The Third Era of Digital Art* is, in part, one such factual first person account of my adventures. It discusses the stunted state of the kind of visuals you see at live electronic music gigs, and in doing so refers to the year I spent working for [Groove Armada](#)¹⁴ circa 2011. It also discusses [Gantz Graf](#)¹⁵, a piece of work that continues to obsess me and influence my work in myriad ways, and includes an unsubtly shoehorned mention of the time I (very briefly) met [Skrillex](#)¹⁶. It may be the most pathetic celebrity anecdote you read this year. I gave this one, again, to *The Creators Project*, who published an abbreviated version on the site, wisely removing all the namedropping and slagging people off.

The final chapter, *Peacetime Technologists* was then writ-

¹³<http://www.metamorphiction.com/>

¹⁴<http://www.groovearmada.com>

¹⁵<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyJfH4GoOQ>

¹⁶<http://www.skrillex.com>

ten solely with the book in mind, freeing me to draw themes together without it having to stand alone. *Peacetime Technologists* attempts not only to define what digital art is, and why I sometimes admit to practicing it, but also explains just about everything that is wrong with society and how the ills of the world can be fixed using digital art. Sorry, but it does.

If you read my last book (thanks if you did), you'll find the format of this one is rather different. *Generative Art*¹⁷ was a practical guide to its subject, which explained its concepts mainly through hands-on tutorial. This book is strictly about the philosophy, the *other* side of the equation, the side that can't be taught with step by step instructions. It is a short collection of my adventures and ideas within this one, rather nebulous, field. I've never claimed to be an artist, although I've exhibited in galleries. I've never claimed to be a writer either, although this is now my second book. And I would never claim to own this subject, or even to be capable of unambiguously defining what digital art actually *is*. I'd be instantly suspicious of anyone who did make such a claim.

This is why I deliberately avoid attempting any kind of pithy definition of digital art; for fear that if I did somehow manage to nail it I'd essentially be firing the bolt to the head that would snuff out its fluttering spark of life. As Alan Watts once said, "the greater part of human activity is designed to make permanent those experiences and joys

¹⁷<http://zenbullets.com/book.php>

which are only loveable because they are changing”. The beauty of a flying creature is not improved by pinning it to a board by its wings, and to my mind digital art is currently one such delicate, emergent lifeform, one which requires very careful handling.

I write, without apology, solely from a coder’s perspective. I do this because I have to; as coding is what I do for food. But on this subject a coder’s perspective is a good angle. If there’s any one group who really understand a field it is the workers at the face, the ones who’ve seen the magic from behind the curtain. Coders speak languages from both sides of the divide, so they can translate the digital world better than anyone.

This is one of the worrying trends of the new Century, that we are now inhabitants of a reality in which only a few speak the native tongue. We live in a world of machines; where Big Data munchers decide government policy. Where there are more automata on social networks than there are real people. Where our art, entertainment and culture is the product of computers as much as it is people. If we cannot speak the language of these machines, how can we hope to understand the world? This is a concern that underlies all these chapters.

So, to reiterate, I present my stories not as a definition, but as a snapshot. These were the adventures we were having in the early part of the second decade of the 21st Century. Some of what I talk about here is being called art. Some of it may be not. Perhaps there might be a better name for it

when time allows a suitable perspective, but for now this is what this thing looks like from where I'm sitting. At the centre of an explosion in a time without eschatology.

I'd hope you'll analyse the worth of these adventures as critically as I have, and that you have fun doing so. While I pull hard against the gravity of over-seriousness, I also argue that digital art should not be dismissed as trivial, as there is clearly a movement here. Something is afoot. Evidenced by the art establishment's stumbling from a few steps behind. Once they catch up it's all over, digital art will be just 'art', and will lose some of the frivolity and experimentalism it currently enjoys within its transitional classification. Which will be a shame. Especially when all it has ever wanted to do is run, jump, catch, throw, dance and sing songs.

[@zenbullets](#)¹⁸, Brighton, Winter 2013-14

¹⁸<https://twitter.com/zenbullets>

1. No One Ever Cried At A Website

Do people really think this? Do they accept it as a truth? Is it even true? Has there yet been the one case that renders the statement redundant? Surely, a rainy autumn day, a middle-aged mom, tired and premenstrual, suddenly overcome by the sight of some elegant bevelling...? It must have happened a million times.

It was [Evan Boehm](#)¹⁹ who reminded me of this hateful aphorism returning from the *Resonate* conference in Belgrade. I muttered it to myself, under my breath, for weeks after that. It troubled me. What the statement implies is that there is no beauty in digital technologies. No pathos. Nothing that might move someone. Which is utter bollocks. There isn't anything intrinsically *un*-profound in our latest batch of technological marvels, and it is hopelessly shortsighted to suggest there is. But I understand the reasons for this misconception, which is what I'm going to discuss in this first chapter.

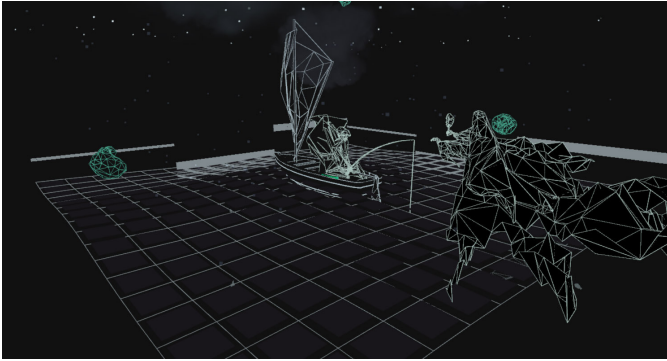
Was there ever a point in Rodin's career when he threw his tools to the ground and sobbed that no one had ever cried at a lump of rock? Or did Muybridge or Méliès ever think

¹⁹<http://www.peelyoureyes.com/>

that no one could be moved by rapidly flickering light? If they did, they didn't let it stop them. I think it's time we too stopped beating ourselves up about where we stand in the history of our digital tools. The conversation should not be about *whether* someone could be moved, but *how* we might move them.

Evan addressed this question with *The Carp and The Seagull*²⁰; a beautiful, melancholy browser experience, that gracefully walked that uneasy tightrope between interaction and narrative. On launch there was much wow-ing over the technology behind the piece, WebGL, but what I loved most about it was its boldness; its shameless attempt to aim at the heart – using only vector graphics and mouse. It neither celebrates nor apologises for its technology, it just tells its story in the best way it can.

²⁰<http://thecarpandtheseagull.thecreatorsproject.com/>



The Carp And The Seagull

It may be telling that this work did not start out as a WebGL piece. Through the two-year lifespan of the project it went through various forms, from short story to linear animation to interactive. The technology was not at the core of the idea. It wasn't *about* WebGL and what can be done with it, even if, inevitably, much of the attention it received was because of this.

This is the nub of the problem. Too much attention is awarded to the mechanisms of digital art, rather than the message or intent of the work. Yes, these new technologies are terribly exciting, with the new possibilities for expression that are being opened up, but that shouldn't be an excuse to label every tech demo we knock out as "art". Art requires a little more than that. Not much, but a little.

In these shifting times the programmers seems to have a continual problem deciding what they should call themselves. "Digital Artist" seems to have become the current

job title. Two years ago they were all “Creative Technologists”. In 2010, “Code Ninjas”. Roses by other names, all smelling just as sweet. Next year they’ll be “Imagineers”, “NeoArchitects”, “Exploraticians”, or whatever jargon-du-jour the culture has farted into the lexicon. It’s not their fault; they have no idea what they do for a living. No one does. They’ve all suffered trying to explain it to their mum, or a crowd of non-geeks at a party. This may be why geeks don’t go to many parties.

But that doesn’t mean that, in the absence of any better category, they should always be allowed to call their latest experiment “art”. It’s something we often tend to do with things that have no apparent use but are kinda pretty. Digital Art already has enough enemies; it doesn’t need its own practitioners sullyng the name with misuse. I won’t embarrass anyone by linking to them, writing as I am from my glasshouse here. They’re nice people and they don’t do it with malice. They read this on [CreativeApps](#)²¹ anyway, so they know who they are.

Evan’s work earns the “art” label, not because it’s technologically interesting, but because it’s conceptually interesting. If you don’t give any thought to the meaning or emotional involvement of the work, it’s not really art. This emotional involvement, if you believe the hypothetical aphorist Evan quotes, is the thing that is lacking from digital technologies. And I’ll concede that if you see a long parade of tech demos masquerading as art you might start

²¹<http://CreativeApplications.net>

to believe this. But it's not true.

Looking at our current favourite mediums, there are three commonly employed emotional trigger-mechanisms:

1. character identification - feeling what another feels, i.e. [empathy](#)²²;
2. sheer beauty – a more abstract, ineffable, gut response; and
3. interaction – the ability to make a connection, to invest a part of yourself in something.

The first is probably the most widely used. It is key to mediums such as books and cinema. I'm sure even the coldest hearts reading this will admit to having, at some point, been absorbed by a film or novel; having been carried along by a narrative. Unless you are a practitioner (i.e. a novelist or film-maker) your attention is effortlessly taken beyond the *mechanism* of the medium. Most (I say most) have no problem burying any obsessive assessment of the form far from their conscious enjoyment.

With digital technologies the primary obsession is with how it works. It is only when you put a digital theorist in front of a painting or a ballet that they may be in danger

²²<http://twitter.com/ashedryden/status/314824566788734976>

of suffering the second category of emotional trigger - being punched in the gut by sheer beauty. Again, I think technology presents no barrier to this response either. Generative art, for example, is still a young medium, but has already produced many works of [staggering beauty](#)²³.

The third category, interaction, is perhaps the most contentious. The march of the digital age has so far been pushing towards increasingly non-passive experiences, which is why it's a core part of many technologies. Culture is no longer something behind a velvet rope or glass case, it is to be touched and steered and danced with. Technology is an enabler here - think of [Cornell's boxes](#)²⁴ (intricate, tactile items designed for interaction), which we can no longer touch because they have become too valuable. Today we make digital interfaces designed specifically for the great unwashed to prod and poke at with their fat, sweaty fingers.

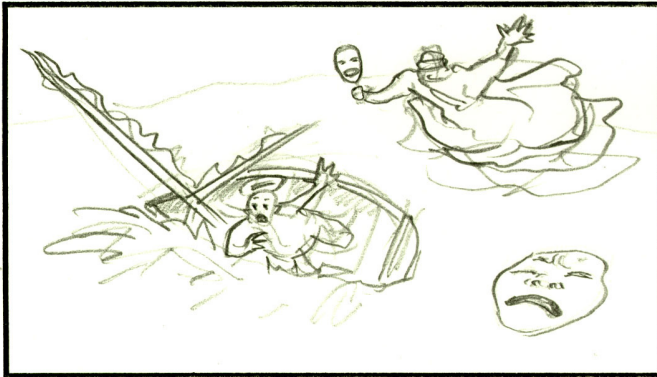
The Carp And The Seagull plays with interaction as a form of involvement. The interactions are not particularly sophisticated, but they are enough to give a sense of control over how the scene is playing out. We nurture the narrative Tamagotchi-style with subtle clicks and swipes.

When you present a work on the web you are dealing with a greatly shortened attention span – you have minutes at best, before your viewer clicks away to something else – so standard linear narratives aren't ideal. This is where a

²³<http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/jared%20tarbell>

²⁴<http://www.google.co.uk/search?q=Cornell's+boxes&tbm=isch>

little interaction works, just enough to give the user a bit of an investment. Take interaction too far, overuse it, and the experience becomes too open, too user defined, and the authorial voice is lost. Contrary to what those in marketing may have you believe, not all users want to be able to “create their own stories”. This is because they’re not all coked-up control-freaks like the agency wankers who spout this shite. Some, believe it or not, have an interest in what the author is saying.



The Carp And The Seagull Concept Sketch

Another strength of *The Carp And The Seagull*'s control method is that it's not signposted. It is for us to explore and work out for ourselves. I love this approach; I've used it in [my own projects](http://zenbullets.com/projectszb.php#automaton)²⁵. Encouraging the user to peek and poke and see-what-it-does can be quite counterintuitive with our grown-up reserve and respect. It's something

²⁵<http://zenbullets.com/projectszb.php#automaton>

children do instinctively, before we beat it out of them in our efforts to shape them into adults. It's by tapping into this inner child, the unshielded sensitive lump at our core, that interaction can become an emotional activity.

Adult reserve is not the only barrier. Interaction designers also have to fight decades of ingrained “ways of interacting with computers”. The generations who were raised with computers that were expensive and easily broken have made the way we approach them rather anachronistic.

Another recent digital artwork, Kyle MacDonald²⁶'s *People Staring at Computers*²⁷, exposed this. Kyle wrote a script that made the webcam on his Mac snap his face at intervals while he used his computer. When he looked back over the images he saw the same expression, or rather lack of expression; his “looking at a computer” face.

He repeated the experiment on public computers, rigging display machines in Apple Stores to snap people testing them and upload the photos to a Tumblr (a project that earned him a [visit from the FBI](#)²⁸). He saw the same expressionlessness on strangers' faces. It's the TV-watching expression, that drone-like state of suggestion that advertisers love. It suggests there is a certain, default mode that

²⁶<http://kylemcdonald.net/>

²⁷http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People_Staring_at_Computers

²⁸<http://gizmodo.com/5819269/people-staring-at-computers-project-raided-by-the-secret-service>

we engage when faced with a computer. We might smile at loved ones and cat videos, but the “rest” setting for our interaction is blank-faced and passive.



Image from “People Staring At Computers”

There is a move to counter this over-serious traditionalism, from the hackers who insist their machines can be *toys* as well as just work tools. They make much of the importance of playfulness and subversion in their practises. It’s a noble cause, but it’s a jump to the other extreme. What’s missing is a subtle gradient between the two - a range of possible emotional responses.

This is partly why, for so many, it is easy to talk of a dichotomy between technology and emotion. Why it is unimaginable for someone to cry at a website. But I’m going to propose a cure.

It's mostly a matter of semantics.

At this very moment there is an undergraduate somewhere in the world writing a dissertation about the *collaboration* between *art* and *technology*. Apparently it's a hot topic. There is a new trend for *programmers* starting to call themselves *artists* (and artists becoming programmers), I know this because I have read twelve articles on the subject this month. It's not bullshit. It's just irrelevant. It's a straw-man argument, based on the misapprehension that "art" and "technology" wouldn't normally "collaborate" in a natural way.

Technology is a means; art is an end product. There is no meaningful dichotomy between the two. Painting is a technology. The pencil is a technology. The harpsichord is a technology. So why do we never hear of painters being asked their opinion on the "interface" between painting and art? It's because there is nothing interesting to say there.

We only call a medium a technology when it is new, when it still has novelty, when it is not widely understood or accepted by the masses. But all mediums start as technologies – drawing, sculpture, photography, cinema; all these were technologies first, mediums later.

The same goes for programming and art. There is nothing unusual in code-based art forms. There may have been twenty years ago, when it was a more arcane skill. Or forty years ago, when it was only practised by mathematicians.

But now *everyone* can do it. My [last book](#)²⁹ attempted to prove that point. Coding is just another tool in the artist's toolbox. Another form of expression. It is only unusual to those who choose not to partake.

All artists must choose a means of expression, and learning to code is just one of the available options. It's only as hard as learning a musical instrument. It is just about training your brain to think in a certain, hyper-logical way (the way machines think), just as playing guitar is teaching your fingers to fall into certain patterns. As with any other skill, it's something that takes practise. And something that is best learned as young as possible (my seven-year-old, inspired by his dad, is currently teaching himself [Scratch](#)³⁰). But it is not a novel skill. It's not peculiar. Not any more.

The mediums are fascinating, yes; there is plenty to get excited about, and plenty for the tech bloggers to write about. But for our technologies to become mediums, for them to reach an emotional maturity, we need to get them to a point when we can enjoy them without seeing the mechanism. To squint and see beyond it. Then the weeping can commence.

²⁹<http://zenbullets.com/book.php>

³⁰<http://scratch.mit.edu/>

About The Author

Matt Pearson, aka *zenbullets*, is a writer and coder based in Brighton, UK. His projects include *100 Abandoned Art-works* - a hundred open-sourced generative art sketches produced over a period of two years; various music videos; live visuals; branding and commercial work; and a handful of interactive art pieces.

His first book *Generative Art*³¹ (Manning 2011), earned critical acclaim and was recently translated for the Japanese market. This book is his second, the first he has self-published.

<http://zenbullets.com/>³²

[@zenbullets](https://twitter.com/zenbullets)³³

³¹<http://zenbullets.com/book.php>

³²<http://zenbullets.com/>

³³<https://twitter.com/zenbullets>

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³⁴<http://zenbullets.com>

³⁵<https://twitter.com/zenbullets>