FCJ-026 Postcard from the Edge: Autobiographical Musings on the Dis/organisations of the Multimedia Industry

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2 This article is a critical reflection on the dot.com boom and the volatile industry, discipline and conditions of labour it has spawned. It offers an autobiographical insight into my past experiences as one of its labourers, as well as my current perspective as an academic responsible for cultivating these industry professionals. Autobiography offers an opportunity to impart my observations as a practitioner in the multimedia industry during its heyday, and lends to them an 'experiential authority' (Clifford, 1988: 35) which has been largely ignored in dot.com studies. According to Stanley (1997), autobiography offers a connection between the individual and the social, in this case, the individual new media worker and larger industry of which I was part. In addition, as an educator I am familiar with the importance of reflective practice in experiential learning (Boud and Miller, 1996: 3; Beaty, 1992: 13) and have access to the experiential data of my students to examine the role of creativity in multimedia practice.

3 The empirical work which informs this article ranges from 'retrospective ethnography' (Greed, 1990: 147) of my participation in the dot.com industry to survey responses from students outlining their perceived requirements for entering a technology-related industry. Both sets of data illustrate the precarious state of a "creative industry" such as interactive multimedia, and the labour which constitutes such an industry. They also point to some tentative explanations for this insecurity: firstly, the interdisciplinarity of interactive multimedia lends an inherent uncertainty to the field. Secondly, the youth of the field, in terms of the age of the multimedia industry and the profile of its workforce, leads it to have somewhat ahistorical tendencies. This is manifest in its preoccupation with ease and speed, as well as its weak connection between theory and practice.

4 Such unstable relationships undermine the notion of "creative organisation". Indeed, further interrogation of this term implies an oxymoron in both definition and experience. As mentioned above, multimedia is hardly organised – as an industry, discipline or labour movement. In part, this is because creativity appears to require a degree of disorganisation, given its popular interpretation as occupying the middle territory between brilliance and insanity. Lateral or creative thinking, commonly regarded as the antithesis of logical thinking, connotes an ability to think creatively, tangentially, abstractly, beyond set boundaries (Banks et al., 2002: 257). While the dot.com industry is most definitely disorganised (and thus has the potential to provide a creative environment), I will argue that its pace and pressure are not conducive to fostering creative dispositions, processes or cultures (Tan, 1998: 23).

5 The volatility of the dot.com industry as seen in the short period between its boom and bust indicates at some level a culture of risk-taking which is necessary to establish a climate of creativity (Isaksen and Lauer, 2002: 81). Yet the numerous casualties of this era when popular expectations and aspirations for the Internet were at their peak, suggest that it is an industry which does not generally embrace critical self-reflection. As Shedroff says:

6 > This looking back over the shoulder is critical because most technological industries have almost nonexistent attention spans and proclaim it worthless to look ahead more than six months. This short-sightedness is one of the reasons the industry is so hit-and-miss, having soaring successes as well as spectacular failures – and many more failures than successes. (Shedroff, 2001: 22)

7 The fast-moving nature of the industry is intrinsic to its disorganisation and lack of introspection. I was swept up in the dot.com riptide in the late 1990s when I returned to Australia after years of London living. Having no experience in the industry up to that point, I landed a job as a producer/project manager at a multimedia production agency. I was swimming with the current, which at that time, was pulling in people with no experience, to its ultimate detriment, when the resulting tidal wave took most of them under. What follows is an autobiographical construction of 'then through now' (Stanley, 1992: 48), in an attempt to make sense of the macro at the level of the micro.

Call Us, We won't Call You

8 The agency had advertised for staff in a metropolitan newspaper. However, I had interpreted the advertisement to be for an employment agency looking for multimedia professionals to recruit.

That is, the ad had been written in such as way as to suggest a transient kind of employment; a promiscuous sort of relationship with no obligation of commitment from either side. The agency was also seeking various types of people rather than one particular person to fill a designated role. So I sent in my CV expecting the usual process of being contacted by a nonchalant recruitment consultant wanting me to come in for an interview, then telling me I'll be contacted when something suitable comes up.

9 It wasn't entirely unanticipated that nobody called. So as per convention, I made the follow-up phone call to ask if my CV had been received. The receptionist put me through to 'Simon' who confirmed that he had received my CV and asked me to come in for an interview that afternoon. Feigning enthusiasm, I agreed, believing it was probably better to tackle the questionnaires and tests required in order to register with the agency sooner rather than later.

10 When I arrived, it became apparent that the agency was not a recruitment consultancy, but a production house for various types of media, including multimedia. Thus, completely unprepared, I was ushered into the boardroom for an interview for a position within this organisation with 'Simon', who turned out to be the managing director. As mentioned previously, I had no experience in the industry, but made a persuasive argument for the parallels between what I did as an educator who had developed new degrees in multimedia studies (that is, facilitate, organise, coordinate) and what I was to do as an industry practitioner. He offered me a position as a 'freelance project manager' beginning the following week on my ambitiously requested hourly rate.

11 While this experience marked my entrance into the industry, it is not atypical in terms of the other similar types of "creative organisations" I encountered during that boom time. Firstly, it is indicative of the lack of hierarchy prevalent in such organisations: easy access to senior management was evident not only during the recruitment process, but also in the open plan offices which sat MD next to coder. While this could be commended as egalitarian office politics, the open plan of the workplace was also representative of the 'organic structure' required to support creativity within an organisation, as recommended by Tan (1998: 28).

12 Therefore, a second characteristic of the creative organisation, and a by-product of its lack of hierarchy, is a lack of structure. With only a small number of permanent staff, the organisation expands and contracts in accordance with each breath of the business. In her discussion of the evolution of the web development team, Burdman (1999: 27-28) identifies the project manager, technical lead, designers and web developer as the core members. In this particular agency, these roles were occupied entirely by freelance contractors, with the skeleton of the company consisting of the managing director and senior producers.

13 Thirdly, the constant state of flux in these organisations leads them to be highly disorganised, or rather "creative disorganisations". As people move in and out of the company, projects are left stranded without caretakers, as happened in the project I was assigned to troubleshoot. The resignation of the company's production manager, who was also the supervising producer on the project, left only an inexperienced web developer in charge. Soon, the large multinational client was asking questions about why the project was running months behind schedule and I was thrown in to answer them.

14 Fourthly, amid such chaotic conditions, it is unsurprising that the labourers within these "disorganisations" are themselves not organised in terms of demanding their entitlements. As Banks et al. (2002: 256) note, apart from the small to medium enterprises, the remainder of the "creative industries" is constituted by freelancers, sole traders and the self-employed. With so many freelancers employed as needed at the agency, at times there was not enough office space or computers to accommodate them. Some had to bring their own computers in at no extra cost, graciously absorbing the effort and expense into their hourly rate. When the managing director announced that the company was experiencing a cashflow problem which meant that we would not be paid for 'a couple of days', there was not a bat of an eyelid. As the couple of days translated into over a week, the workers continued on projects that were supposed to be referred to in the past tense, often working around the clock and on weekends to meet the impossible deadlines of a client. Having sat with programmers on a number of occasions until the early hours of morning, I found that as a self-proclaimed member of Generation X, I simply could not keep up let alone understand the motivations of the younger, invariably childless, mostly single Generation Y members with whom I was working.

Generation Y-not?

15 Why not work for 24 hours without sleep? Why not be seduced by the appreciation shown by the company through the endless supply of Mountain Dew, CabCharges and takeaway meals? The apolitical orientations of these new media workers was as much a product of their demographic as the industry. Allegiances were difficult to form, and even more difficult to maintain, in the absence of any sense of history or continuity. During the 'utopian moment' (Dovey, 1996: 114-135) of the Internet, one was always in the present or literally "in the moment", so to speak. This is beautifully articulated in the risky existence of the freelancer and their transient affiliation to an organisation. Like the y axis of a Cartesian graph, they only intersect with a workplace at a certain point in time, lying perpendicular (and therefore oblivious) to its lineage (or x axis). With no individual or collective past in the new media industry, positioning oneself in the present and the future was problematic. It is only in autobiographical hindsight that I can re-present the historical moment (Stanley, 1992: 48).

16 At the level of industry, the absence of precedence and past was both contrived and circumstantial. To assume the mantle of "new media" has meant distancing the traditional, and a reluctance to be perceived as part of a historical trajectory of older media (Bobo, 1993: 273). The scramble for multimedia to find its own niche has meant that it has isolated itself from other disciplines, yet the inherent interdisciplinarity of the field has also made problematic its historical positioning. The disciplines involved in designing digital experiences (Norman, 1998) – anthropology, sociology, psychology, engineering, architecture, industrial design, technical communication – have been applied disparately without much consideration or consolidation of the theoretical traditions and rich histories of each. As Shedroff (2001: 2) asserts, it is an area with an ambiguous identity since it has 'simultaneously … no history (since it is a discipline only recently defined), and the longest history (since it is the culmination of many ancient disciplines)'.

17 This dearth of theory and history in commercial multimedia production has led the discipline to become highly pragmatic and relentlessly sensible, more so than its film and broadcast media counterparts. Nowhere is this more evident than in the notion of "usability", whereby the Web is regarded as a utility, and users are seen as having only utilitarian motives for their online activities. The premise of usability is to make the achievement of online tasks easy and efficient for users such that web sites must have 'zero learning time or die' (Nielsen, 2000). In the words of usability expert, Steve Krug (2000), 'don't make me think!'. In a fast-paced industry, such ideas are quick to circulate, disseminated amongst industry practitioners by industry practitioners, but slow to ferment. Rather than expansion and mutation of such ideas, they are, instead, condensed and distilled into a series of rules. Nielsen, with his famous mantra 'usability is king', developed a set of ten general heuristics (Nielsen, nd) and 117 guidelines for implementing Flash in web design (Macromedia, 2002).

18 With such ideas elevated to the canon in the area of digital media development, the tenuous connection between theory and practice becomes apparent. Cognitive labour becomes sublimated to manual labour, as the basic tenets of usability are not only applied to ensure an easy and speedy online experience for the Web user, but also to facilitate effortless and expedient production by the Web developer. While the rise of the creative industries is the result of the post-industrial transition from manual and mechanial modes of production to informational, symbolic and knowledge-based ones (Banks et al., 2002: 256), it seems that new media enterprises are shifting backwards with labour-intensive notions of "building" and "hand-coding". Thus new media labour becomes akin to a "trade" in its favouring of practice over theory, with a literal trade-off between doing and thinking. A professional environment such as this translates into pervasive beliefs amongst Generation Y-not members about what skills are essential to working in the field.

The Industry Context and its effect on Expectations of Students of Interactive Multimedia

19 The occupational pragmatism that is represented in the notion of usability is inevitably articulated in the expectations of multimedia practitioners seeking professional development. The dislocation between theory and practice is apparent in the desire for technical expertise, suggesting they identify themselves less as knowledge workers and more as manual labourers. In this respect, multimedia seems to be the antithesis of a creative industry in that the necessity of technical skill

outweighs other components that have been defined as crucial to creativity – that of innovation, experimentation, people management or teamwork (Banks et al., 2002).

As coordinator for a suite of postgraduate courses in interactive multimedia, empirical data gathered from students through regular and formal subject evaluations[1] indicate that multimedia practice is often interpreted as largely embodying software skills:

'Try to work more in the workshops, because that is the main purpose of the course and experience of Flash is the most important'.

'I would be disappointed not to be able to explore Flash action scripting in the course and 100% Flash dynamic database. Also, we learn about audio/sound, but how about video?'

'Give some workshop on technical skills such as Photoshop'.

'More theories, hands on Photoshop workshop'.

'Like most university subjects, there is not enough hands on, practical content'.

Students' attitudes towards learning can be seen to be partly informed by their experiences of working in the industry, as well as reflective of an industry perspective of professional development. However, they also imply more pervasive social attitudes towards technology which equate technological progress with social progress (Henwood et al., 2000: 11), and subsequently, technical knowledge with social power. That is, those with technology skills are perceived to be at the forefront of social change. Therefore, if social development is technologically determined, then those working in the technology industries influence society. According to Wyatt (1998), such beliefs about the power of technology are as popular as they are pervasive, and need to be taken seriously. This sense of technological determinism in which technology is seen to lead development processes, also came to the fore:

'More technical details would be useful'.

'I'd be most disappointed not to gain the latest ideas and technologies when the course is finished'.

'Maybe we can put more focus on technology, because some of us don't have experience of the digital media industry'.

'More technological development and current issues. More technical issues'.

Students' preoccupation with technical skill would suggest less value is placed on 'soft' skills, those which are often associated with creativity (Tan, 1998: 28). This is often manifest in a belief that activities such as reading and research, which provide a framework for the creative generation, debate and play of ideas (Isaksen, 2002: 80-81) will not help them attain or even complement their desired technical skills. Again, this would seem to point to the misfit between theory and practice in multimedia, particularly the absence of theoretical underpinnings to multimedia practice:

'Less readings because the sum of all readings across the course is really a problem to overcome'.

'Less time / lectures on the "theory" of groupwork'.

'Give less of theory, more of real practical experience'.

There is a symbiotic relationship between how students approach their studies and how they consider they will be working in the multimedia industry. For students already working within the multimedia industry, the pace and pressure under which they work is also transferred to their studies. This is not helped by the multimedia industry's notoriety for "churning and burning" its members, a reputation which was sealed during the dot.com boom years. Therefore, the pressure of time and currency also featured in students' responses to subjects they were studying, as demonstrated by the need to keep up to date with the latest technological developments and dispense with creative and academic practices which require freedom and time for critical reflection but may not produce a solution. Students placed a high value on their time, and felt compelled to learn as much and as quickly as possible. As multimedia practitioners, they adopt principles of user-centred design by simplifying and reducing the time needed for a user task (Soloway and Pryor, 1996). This is subsequently applied to their postgraduate study so that learning activities are perceived as utilitarian exercises to be performed as quickly and easily as possible. The belief that postgraduate study in interactive multimedia is essentially formal training for working in the industry is expressed in the desire for "real-world" practices to be taught in the classroom:

'Bring some real project process into class'.

'Some practical work from real life would add value on this subject'.

38 'We need to learn how things should be done, not guessing them'.

39 'More readings illustrating real-life processes... would be more interesting and more useful than theoretical readings on multimedia practices'.

40 'Provide a more real-life approach'.

41 While this perception of "real life" can be taken to mean industry-standard conventions and processes, it implies more profoundly its perceived differentiatation from academic practices and theoretical approaches to studying interactive multimedia. If study is approached in the same manner as professional work, it follows that students may then regard learning as just a 'new form of labour' (Eden et al., 1996), or perhaps another form of labour:

42 > By integrating working and learning, people learn within the context of their work on real-world problems. Learning does not take place in a separate phase and in a separate place, but is integrated into the work process. (Fischer, 2000)

I Think and Do, Therefore I Am...

43 Fischer's definition of lifelong learning supports this alignment between work and education. However, this is challenging within an industry where the appreciation of theory and critical reflection is limited because knowledge is endemically acquired "just in time".

44 I am aware of the limitations of this paper: it is autobiographical and therefore subjective in nature. But it has been a means of distinguishing between lived experience and popular representation of the multimedia industry. It has also faciliated experiential learning upon which theory and future action can be developed (Miller, 1993: 88-92). Furthermore, it has attempted to mitigate this subjectivity by drawing from empirical data to examine how the multimedia industry has professionally and educationally affected individuals, namely students of interactive multimedia. In exploring the alignment between my own experiences as a multimedia practitioner and the stated learning objectives of my students, it has offered a critical reflection on the industry from its edge, at its interface with education.

45 My current position as an educator on the peripheries of the dot.com industry has enabled me to undertake a "retrospective ethnography" of my experiences working in the centre of the industry during its boom years. This personal and historical interrogation has merely identified a problem (the conditions under which a multimedia practitioner labours that are incongruous with being part of a "creative industry") but not offered a solution (in terms of how students' expectations might be transformed in the educational process, which in turn may change the culture of the industry). However, it has highlighted the risks faced by multimedia practitioners who are constantly on the precipice of un/employment: the insecurity of their freelance existence necessitates a cautious balance between churn and burnout. It has also drawn attention to the difficult relationship between studying and working in interactive multimedia, between academic and industry practices.

46 These precarious ties are illustrative of the tenuous connection between technology and creativity. The disorganisations of multimedia – as a discipline, in an agency environment, as an industry and in terms of its labourers – undermine its definition as a creative industry. Given a broad definition of creativity as the product of individual disposition, development processes and organisational culture (Tan, 1998: 23), it is clear that creativity is affected by forces more encompassing and powerful than technology alone. Rather, the social and industrial context in which it exists is a more influential determinant of its outcome than the number of people in an organisation who can be categorised as "creatives".

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Note

[1] In the case of these postgraduate courses, feedback from students is formally sought up to twice per semester for each core subject in interactive multimedia, of which there are six. Thus, in a Masters program, student suggestions are gathered on twelve occasions before reaching the capstone subject.

[back]

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