Expressive Processing
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Matthew Fuller, Lev Manovich, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, editors

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Preface

Expressive Processing
This book demonstrates a new approach to understanding digital media—and uses it to shed light on two of my favorite kinds of media: digital fictions and computer games. This new approach assumes that it isn’t just the external appearance and audience experience of digital media that matter. It is also essential to understand the computational processes that make digital media function.

Computational processes are a powerful new tool in the hands of authors. Shaping these processes enables the finely honed commercial entertainments of the computer game industry. Inventing new processes is at the heart of the radical media experiments of artificial intelligence (AI) and other areas of computer science. Finding unexpected uses for processes is common in the fusion of concept and craft that defines the work of independent artists, writers, designers, and studios. Such authorial expression through processes is one of the central topics of this book and one of the meanings of the term expressive processing. I hope the projects examined in this book can help authors think productively about the future of fiction, games, and digital media more generally.

For critics seeking to understand process-intensive work, finding an appropriate way to grapple with processes themselves can be puzzling. While some authors focus on the potential of interpreting each work’s source code, this level of detail is not necessarily telling (for most works, the textual style of the code is not central), and for many works the code itself is not available. Instead, this book’s approach looks at what I call the operational logics at work within a variety of examples. My focus is on interpreting what processes do—the ideas expressed through the design of their movements—and the relationships that processes express with schools of thought and communities of practice. Looking at what processes express in this manner, enabling critics to interpret elements
of works not visible on the surface, is the other main element of what I mean by expressive processing.

Beyond digital media specifically, I also believe it is essential for our political future that people develop the ability to think critically about software systems. Coming to understand the processes of digital media can contribute to this. Many general concepts about software are more easily understood when tied to specific, legible examples, which digital media can provide. I explore a number of the examples in this book in terms of their wider lessons about software and the potential political implications of these lessons.

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