

Programmed Visions

Software and Memory

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

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Preface: Programming the Bleeding Edge of Obsolescence

This book was inspired by the many lives of new media—by the ways that it not only survives, but also thrives on, cycles of obsolescence and renewal.

In the early 2000s, new media seemed to be dead, and the utopian and dystopian discourses around the World Wide Web and Y2K were exposed for what they were: hype. Gone were the celebrations of the “new economy,” virtual reality, and cyberspace. The term *new media* even seemed “old”: the New York New Media Association folded in 2003 and many New Media Groups within corporate structures (Apple, Gannett, etc.) and many new media companies disappeared.¹ Everyone was on the Internet—new media was everywhere—but new media seemed boring; the reality of surfing the net did not compare to the glitzy cyberpunk visions touted by *Mondo 2000*.

By 2008, however, the future was, once more, in fashion, and there was a growing impatience with the so-called critical hindsight that flourished after the dot.bombs and 9/11. Rather than sobering if banal reassessments of the Internet as a “double-edged sword” that aids both terrorists and victims, the main strain of both popular and scholarly new media analysis stressed future possibilities and sought to outline the next big thing: mobile mobs, Web 3.0, cloud computing, radical topsight, and so on. A sense that something had really changed, as well as a desire to capitalize on this change, fueled this renewal: the returns of new media are linked to the promise of financial returns. Silicon Valley, if not Alley, had recovered from the demise of the “new economy”; Google was everywhere in every possible form; iPhones and BlackBerries had proliferated; even Granny was on Facebook.com. Every social movement, every social protest appeared to be wired; newspaper companies were folding and television stations laid off staff as content migrated online; everyone, it appeared, was bombarding one another with 140-character-long tweets, and no one seemed to care.

This future 2.0, like Web 2.0 or 3.0, was not as utopian or as bold as its mid-1990s predecessor, *the* future. No one was prophesying the end of all brick-and-mortar businesses; there were no upbeat yet paranoid commercials promising the end to racial discrimination and the beginnings of a happy global village; there were no must-read cyberpunk novels or films outlining cyberspace’s gritty, all-encompassing nature,

although *new media* does now encompass the bio- and nanotech. Instead, even within this optimism, there was a dim yet gnawing sense that this too will pass, that every next big thing is also the next big bubble (if it's anything at all). To call something new, after all, is to guarantee its obsolescence, and this hopeful return to the future as future simple—as what will be, as what you will do, as a programmed upgrade to your already existing platform—constantly recedes and disappears. Although this cycle of the ever-returning and ever-receding new mirrors the economic cycle it facilitates, the undeadness of new media is not a simple consequence of economics; rather, this book argues, this cycle is also related to new media's (undead) logic of programmability. New media proliferates “programmed visions,” which seek to shape and predict—indeed embody—a future based on past data.

This book addresses this concept of programmability through the surprising materialization of software as a *thing* in its own right. It argues that the hardening of programming into software and of memory into storage is key to understanding new media as a constantly disappointing and inspiring medium of the future. It links this hardening to several factors: computing's gendered and military history, foundational parallels between the fields of genetics and computing technology, long-standing visions of a stable archive of knowledge as driving human progress, and a general, neoliberal trend to personalize power (to make power touch each and all). All this has made the computer, understood as networked software and hardware machines, both an instrument and a symptom of neoliberal governmental power. It has made it an instrument of both causal pleasure and extreme frustration, a means of navigation and obfuscation.

This book, however, does not seek to condemn computers as simple neoliberal tools or to view user empowerment as a form of imprisonment. Computers are mediums of power in the fullest senses of both words. Through them, we can pleurably create visions that go elsewhere, specters that reveal the limitations and possibilities of user and programmer, choices that show how we can rework neoliberal formulations of freedom and flexibility. Specters haunt us through our interfaces—by working with them we can collectively negotiate the dangers and pleasures of the worlds they encapsulate and explode.

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