Social Imagination

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ABSTRACT

This is a short paper that proposes an approach to the activity of live coding as an artistic configuration constituted in a creative practice from improvisation, openness and constant exploration. I just want to share some thoughts about sociability in live coding, in terms of "imagined community" (Anderson 1991) to address this collective aspect.

The approach is anthropological, through ethnographic field work from which the method seeks to explore some combination between a scope, actors and activities and a cut of reality that encompasses practices, values and formal rules. The aim of the ethnography is to address the distinction: "between the real and the ideal culture, between what people do and what people say they do, and hence between the field of practices, values and rules" (Guber 2001).

This work seeks to provide some characterization of a collective artistic expression in constant process, which mediates and constitutes sociability and subjectivities in a sociotechnical context.

1. INTRODUCTION: COLLECTIVELY IMAGINING

In live coding activity, there is a core intention to explore the capabilities to skillfully improvise with code in a challenging way, as in the following field testimony:

> I like the idea of being able to make music using lines of code, and am fascinated about the kind of dexterity and variety of sounds which can come from the simplest bits of code. (testimony A)

But, there is also an intention of further developing a kind of participatory community, in which everyone can participate without being required programming mastery, as Alex McLean explains to Dazed and Confused magazine[1]:

> Many live coders make and adapt their own programming environments: that takes some experience. But proficiency at coding dance music is different to making financial systems or whatever. I've run workshops where I've got non-programmers making acid house together in a couple of hours. I think there's real possibility to make producing algorave music more like drumming circles, where beginners can just join in and learn through doing.

Live coding activity arises from the start as a collective activity, both keeping that daily interaction with each other in the mailing list, through the publication / socialization of its programming languages or during the performance by opening a connection with the audience, as a live coder told me:

The idea is to show and share your compositional thoughts with the audience (testimony B)

In order to ascertain the participatory intention, I would like to refer to sociability in terms of "imagined community" (Anderson 1991). According with Benedict Anderson, all communities larger than primordial villages of contact are imagined. Communities do not be distinguished by their falsehood or legitimacy, but by the style in which are imagined (Anderson 1991) then, in this sense, there would be an idea and a collective construction, from that idea.

Often, in shared conversations, interviews and small talks with live coders, many of them refer to the idea of a cultural growth, in different ways:

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[1] Full article in: http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/16150/1/what-on-earth-is-livecoding.

A participatory community, contribute to a culture that creates a positive environment for everyone who wants to participate, regardless of country of origin and gender. It is about being open and generate closeness and inclusion (testimony C)

////// In the UK there are only a few pockets of coders scattered around. This makes it hard for any kind of live coding scene to gather momentum. When I play a gig, I'm the oddball using a computer and typing to make music on the stage in between 2 rock bands. When playing the Algoraves I met the guys from Mexico City and they talked about how they had their own scene out there and it was like a family, putting gigs on and creating a community together. If these little pockets happen more often, then the future of live coding can only get stronger. (testimony D)

I think the development of languages that become more spatial, collaborative, social, expressed in a wider range of ways, and generally more like a human language. I think the growth of localized live coding communities, are really nice to see, and will make things really real. (testimony E)

For anthropologist Georgina Born, however music has no material essence, it has a plural and distributed materiality. Its multiple simultaneous forms of existence - as sonic trace, discursive exegesis, notated score, and technological prosthesis, social and embodied performance – indicate the necessity of conceiving of the musical object as a constellation of mediations:

Music requires and stimulates associations between a diverse range of subjects and objects – between musician and instrument, composer and score, listener and sound system, music programmer and digital code. Compared with the visual and literary arts, which we associate with a specific object, text or representation, music may therefore appear to be an extraordinarily diffuse kind of cultural object: an aggregation of sonic, social, corporeal, discursive, visual, technological and temporal mediations – a musical assemblage, where this is understood as a characteristic constellation of such heterogeneous mediations (Born 2011).

These mediations take place in four levels of social mediation: (1) music produce its own and diverse sociabilities; (2) music has the capacity to animate imagined communities, aggregating its adherents into virtual collectivities and publics based on musical and other identifications; (3) music refracts wider social relations and (4) music is bound up in the social and institutional forms that provide the grounds for its production, reproduction and transformation (Born 2011). For Hennion, the work of art as a mediation means to review the work:

every detail of gestures, bodies, customs, materials, space, languages, and institutions that it inhabit. Styles, grammar, taste systems, programs, concert halls, schools, business... Without all these accumulated mediations, beautiful work of art does not exist (Hennion 2003).

As the author emphasizes, the work of mediation involves to stop attributing everything to a single creator and realize that creation is much more widely distributed, and is performed in all the interstices between these successive mediations (Hennion, 2003: 89).

Live coding has been constituted as a collective artistic expression that mediates and builds on sociabilities and subjectivities in a socio-technical context, then, Born´s four levels would be given by socio-technical mediations in the case of the live coding scene, because when technology is not only appropriate but, is being experienced by the people, is in turn built and the own experience with technological devices is what makes sense (Bijker 1987).

2. NEW MEANINGS IN PRACTICE

If for many live coders to reach dialogue with computers through live coding or develop new programming languages has new senses, like a political one, for example, from the proposal to achieve a dialogue with software, or software shaped as software art, or to bring programming to diverse audiences, showing the screens during the performance:

I like to think that the Toplap statment of "show us your screens" helps the laptop musician demistify the processess of what he/she is doing. It also gives the viewer a way in to what the coder is doing (testimony F).

To create a participatory community also has new meanings. For Pierre Bourdieu, "the categories of perception of the social world are essentially the product of the incorporation of the objective structures of the social space" (Bourdieu 2002), now, what happens when people try (from theory and practice) a profound change in these objective structures? Bourdieu points in this sense that "knowledge of the social world and the categories which make it possible, are the stakes of the political struggle, a struggle which is inseparably theoretical and practical, over the power of preserving or transforming the social world by preserving or transforming the categories of perception of that world" (Bourdieu 2002). Here inclusion and openness, so valued and promoted by the live coders, and the desire to create a "participatory community" can lead us to an analysis that takes into account the liminality of an "imagined community".

A search beyond a cultural and ideological field of production, is for Victor Turner a "communitas" (Turner 1969). The concept of communitas can be helpful at this point, Victor Turner has used it to talk about "open society, which differs from the structure or closed society" (Turner 1969). The author chooses to speak of communitas instead of the community because:

> For both, individuals and for groups, social life is a kind of dialectical process involving successive experiences of ups and downs, communitas and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality. (…) In this process the opposites of each other and are mutually indispensable (…) In other words, each individual life experience has alternate exposure to structure and communitas, as states and transitions (Turner 1969).

Transitions where usually appear figures, representations, as signs of moral values of communitas, are opposed to coercive power of the supreme political rules, explains Turner, because from the structure all manifestations of communitas appears as dangerous and anarchic (Turner 1969). The process of liminality is negative for primary social structure, and a statement of another order of things and relationships as well. Communitas, he explains, is the product of individual human faculties including rationality, will and memory, which break through the interstices of the structure, in liminality, in experiences of unpredictable potential:

> Liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, rituals, symbols, philosophical systems and works of art. These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man´s relationship to society, nature and culture. But, they are more than classifications, since they incite to action as well as to thought. Each of these productions has a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people (Turner 1969).

Liminality is present in some ways in live coding: new projects and proposals, the search to demystify the relationship with technology, making the code a craft or artistic product, but, more than anything, in the construction of its "participatory community", a collectively imagined community. Liminality of space to express themselves and build various proposals raises transformations not only in the artistic or cultural field but also institutional, the live coding scene involves building an entire world, an art world in terms of Becker (Becker 1982). According to the author, who cooperates in producing a work of art do not do it from nothing but rest on past agreements or custom / conventions, which usually cover the decisions to be taken, and this makes things simpler (Becker 2002). However, Becker explains that people can always do things differently, if they are prepared to pay the price:

> In general, breaking with existing conventions and their manifestations in social structure and material artefacts increases artists´ trouble and decreases the circulation of their work, but at the same time increases their freedom to choose unconventional alternatives and to depart substantially from customary practice. If that is true, we can understand any work as the product of a choice between conventional ease and success and unconventional trouble and lack of recognition (Becker 2002).

The increasing of such problems Becker mentioned, a kind of output that live coders found to this difficulty in building their "art world" was to place their art in the process more than in a finished product. Musical improvisation helps to build another perspective from both, the programmer and programming languages. The emphasis on process, in which materials, digital and analog, are more important than materiality, or a final product allowed live coders to advance in the construction of their activity, and their world, always changing, always exploring the role of technology in art and art in their technological forms. It is there, in

the construction of those environments in process, where live coders feel creative and create from improvising, in the space of active materials.

"The materials are active components of a world-in-training. Wherever life is happening, they are constantly in motion - flowing, scraping, mixing and mutating" (Ingold 2013) in the case of live coding, the materials flow in direct relationship with the artist in the act of experience.

Ingold and Hallam say the difference between improvisation and innovation is that the first characterizes creativity by way of their processes (movements), while the second does so by way of their products (results) (Ingold & Hallam 2007), in this sense we can say live coding is expression and movement, which, in any case raises an end in the process itself.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the social aspect or social settings from artistic practices: "art worlds" (Becker 1982) if, as Howard Becker explains, conventions make it easier and less costly to bouil an art wolrd, but more expensive and difficult to make deep changes (Becker 1974), then, the case of live coding broadly contributes to the acceptance of change as a constant, within a framework in which artistic expression is a process rather than finished product (Di Próspero 2015). The live coding scene makes the change, openness and constant exploration practices that constitute a creative activity.

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