Clinical Currencies: Psychosocial, Critical Ethnic, and Political Economic Approaches to Experimental Game Design/Animation

Abstract

This research proposal is focused on a transdisciplinary set of critical and creative investigations that seek out some new ways of thinking about politics. The approach described below is intended to center considerations of care and to fade out pretensions to an a priori political value inherent to technology or technoscience. The methodology proposed below seeks to promote a certain type of thinking, imaging, and imagining associable with the concept of the “clinical” within the social and political discourse of media studies and the computer arts. This model of the clinical can today be seen and studied in the practices of queer games authors. We can observe this clinical capacity of the queer game through the frame of narrative digital identity. In doing so, I propose to try to rehabilitate the concept of “narrative” for contemporary Media Studies theories of anti-capitalist activism and offer a clinical model for resistance less reliant on “possible” or “potential” outcomes, but also not foreclosed to differences of individual experience. Creatively, I outline a practice in computer art that seeks to intervene on visual and aural mediations of monetization and transaction in online marketplaces like WeChat Pay and Facebook Games by trying to tell audiovisual stories about transactions to their mutual parties that can help to dismantle dominant narratives of who or what should be excluded from the circulations of capital and agency. In short, I consider that the increasingly animated mediation of monetized transactions today might be approached from a clinical perspective.

Research Question

Much of the contemporary scholarship on media studies and practice in computational media has generally centered around the theoretical concept of emergence, the modeling of emergent phenomena, and the corresponding techniques of generative algorithms, circuits, and
aesthetics. Historically, the idea of “emergence” has been juxtaposed to “reductivist” ideas, insofar as a reductionist position tends to explain a given thing in terms of a small or reduced set of its inner components and an emergence focused position tends to explain a given thing in terms of some sort of non-specifiable event or x-factor or transformation. What I discuss in terms of emergence here is more specifically about the ways in which many media and/or computational artists, scholars, and scientists appear to envision life (in everyday, political, scientific ways) as all about potentiality, or possibility. In other words, everyday life or political life or scientific views of life seem like they share an emergence-focused position in which to live is to potentiate, or perhaps in which life is always potent. This is certainly a position that I have held many times as an undergraduate and graduate student. However, as early as my undergraduate thesis work, I started to become snared between two traditions: Black Feminist and Deleuze and Guattari Studies. Indeed, my political respect for black life and my aesthetic and philosophical appreciation of mental images such as “rhizomes”, “assemblages”, and “dramatisations” began to conflict, if not in my own private thinking than without doubt in my conversations between these two scholarly communities.

As I began graduate schooling in computational media arts (with emphases in games, sound art, and parametric design), this conflict increased – particularly as I started conversing with my fellow media studies students who had not engaged with the heaviness of black and black feminist studies. As I kept working through this conflict, I have started to see that perhaps the non-specifiable x-factors of emergence-focused studies of technology aren’t as non-specifiable as we all thought. However, in my research proposal here I want to refrain from claiming to have found the “true” x-factor of emergence. I also want to refrain from falling back on a reductivist position from which it is hard to think about new ways of thinking or living. In a simple sense, I am interested in thinking about emergence without leaning too much on potentiality or possibility, or perhaps on the value of mysteriousness of a given model of emergence. In order to research this kind of thinking, I’ve proposed to center the old concept of narrative in my research-creation and computational media. Drawing across literary and aesthetic, as well as political domains of the humanities, I am interested in rehabilitating the figure of narrative in the growing academic hope and search for an emancipative technology. As such, my research proposal takes up the case of video games, rather than something like machine learning or spatial computing, in order to conceptualize the idea of narrative within the infrastructural objects of smart phones, networks,
gaming consoles, computers, arcades, and the social media. By looking at the ways narrative has been used to describe identity and self in the Psychosocial studies and by literary (Paul Ricoer), gender (Lois McNay), and race (Sylvia Wynter) scholars, I think I can build up a comprehensive framework for how narrative should be a category of thinking for media studies and for experimental computational media that balances the mysteriousness of emergence-focused positions with the time-based structure of narratives.

As stated in the title of my proposed research, I am also interested in how this way of thinking can expand and complicate the interdisciplinary encounters between media studies and psychosocial and political economic research. By adsorbing the conflict in my thinking between what I’ll summarize as “emergence” and “blackness” into the notable media studies emphasis on the technologies and infrastructures of contemporary (computerized) financial markets, I think that we can disrupt the undying figure of the “invisible hand” in the fantasy of a self-regulating financial capitalism by taking into account how stories, particularly stories about peoples’ identities, are involved infrastructurally in the markets. Paying close attention to the changing character of market economies and the increasingly animated mediation of transactions by online banking, cryptocurrencies, and “digital wallets” such as Venmo, Paypal, and WeChat Pay, I propose to study currency objects as a particularly salient case in which stories about identities and the infrastructure of markets can be seen in assembly with one another.

Thus, finally, the core critical and creative elements of my proposal center here on ways of intervening on this assembly of stories and markets. By close reading the narrative techniques of experimental and queer games artists who have long been working with computers to tell stories about identity, I ask how we might leverage clinical perspectives from the arts and humanities to intervene on the animated mediation of transactions. That is, how can we tell more therapeutic and healing stories about transactions on the online marketplaces that we all use today? Indeed, as our financial markets and our online social and private presences become more and more intertwined
through digital profiling, customized ads, and database storage, I’d like to ask to what degree the intimacy that we hold with these devices can be approached through a clinical perspective and, further, what a clinical frame on audiovisual media can be.

**Background and Context**

In my own initial work in computational media, starting around the Spring of 2018, I was intently focused on a way to work between “emergence” and “blackness” through the frame of empathy. Empathy is a massive area of excitement and research in Psychology and Computer Science collaborations and for Virtual Reality companies and practitioners. Specifically, I sought out a political practice based in the development of a sort of prosthetic empathy through immersive media design in which users’ could “walk in the shoes of another” with a theoretical aim towards a deconstruction of the solitary political economic self and a practical aim towards topological representations of embodied experience. My computational design practice centered on what Professor Xin Wei Sha has called “topological media”. Topology, which arose as a mathematical field from much of the same 20th century mathematics that informed Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts (see Carl Freidrich Gauss and Bernhard Riemann), names somewhat ambiguously a mental approach to thinking about space in terms of transformations and embeddings rather than fixed shape and location. While Sha writes elaborately on the programming of what he calls “Responsive Media Environments” according to complex topological mathematics, in my own practice it translated to the use of transforming surfaces and groups of objects through the use of novice implementations of Noise, Flocking, and Randomization algorithms to 3D objects derived from social media interactions or digital representations of my physical body. However, as I began to implement these techniques and to draw out their research-creation symmetries with texts by scholars such as Brian Massumi [1], Xin Wei Sha [2], Luciana Parisi [3], Benjamin Bratton [4], Mark Hansen [5], Alexander Gerner [6], Michael Epperson [7], and Louise Burchill [8], I found a dissociation occurring between my critical lenses and my aesthetic objects. Working with Arts Professor Marina Zurkow to creatively investigate the vital topology of the fat body in its contradiction to the representational association of obesity to morbidity in cultural and medical
contexts, I was intuitively and aesthetically drawn to the expression of my own psychological relation to fatness in a way that could not be reduced to a topological set of relations.

Adipose Tissue I, Unity3D, 2018

The morbidities of my psycho-somatic relationship with my own fat could not be conveyed through these sequences of transformations or embeddings from artist or artwork to viewer, no matter how immersive the media format could be. In other words, and in dramatic departure from these contemporary discourses in computational media practice regarding empathy [9] and topological space [10], I could not topologically transport my experience through an aesthetic field of resonance to anyone, regardless of its digital encoding in magnetic spectra or informatic bytes. Through a period of coursework and maturation through the final year of my graduate study, I was able to reflect critically on this dissociation, conceding that a topological set of relations buoyed by an emergent nature of real sense was not an adequately complex enough account for a contemporary, and media-centered, political disposition. Following the line of Professor Alex Galloway’s bifurcation of the digital and the analog, I stepped back into my previous coursework with Professor Theri Pickens, with whom I had read Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, and Alexander Weheliye during an undergraduate seminar on African American Literary Theory. In doing so, the theoretical model of emergence posited by the literature on topology – and by both the prevailing theories of N. Katherine Hayles and Bernard Stiegler and early career media scholars such as Yuk Hui and Beatrice Fazi – began to seem extraordinarily biocentric in its assessment of meaning and its imaging of life. Tuning to Wynter’s essay on the cybernetic
“Coloniality of Being”, I considered and held fast to a critical diagnosis of the concept of emergence as a biocentric projection of economically, culturally, and computationally inflected images of life onto the surface of actual phenomena. What is “occultated” [11] by this biocentric projection is nothing less than the dysselected, inherently dys-vital, flat phenomena of what Fanon called “les damnés de la terre” and what Denise Ferreira Da Silva calls “the thing”, or in other words, both and simultaneously the exodus of black experience from dominant narratives of history and the forced sustaining of a perverse intimacy between black experience and the dominant narrative of history.

An image of emergence which could not account for the production of meaning by human subjectivities which have been historically rendered as flat by the buoying metrics of a white-centric optical tradition could not hold up to the standards of rigor demanded by the field of black studies and its philosophers. As such, as I work towards the next steps of my education and training as a scholar, I both seek out cases and instances in which to introduce the Wynterian critique of biocentrism to computational thinkers and continue to look for a mode of thinking about media that does not collapse or reduce either the digital or analog or the non-vital or vital. Drawing from Bracha L. Ettinger’s concept of a “matrixial borderspace” [12], my current framework depends on the idea of a discrete psyche which can be linked in shared subjectivities through the communality of stories. This type of thinking poses a non-deterministic lens on the temporal logic of specific durations, considering that time may mean different things in different contexts. Computational media thus viewed from a narrative rather than from an emergent or generative lens has provided me with a method for studying ideas about emergence that refrains from projecting a biocentric image of life or meaning, given that narrative is already posed as a durationally dynamic frame not necessarily committed to the pairing of presence and meaning or of absence and non-meaning. Although I am not yet familiar with most of the literature around Games Studies, and here specifically with the area of ludology, one core of my proposed research is in considering a narratological reading of queer games as a means of applying a non-deterministic [13][14][15] temporal analysis to digital graphical engagements with representational identity. Through a narratological study of queer games, I am interested in locating what we might call the narrative aspects and the graphical capacities of the new digital culture.

Critical Methods
Considering the ways in which queer games such as Anna Anthropy’s early 8-bit work “Dys4ia” engage with the emotional depth of representational identity through the pixels, voxels, and texels of the digital screen, we can try to find alterior models of emergence in the durationally singular aspects and capacities of queer digital narratives about representational identity. In an era in which identity categorization and cuing is entangled in ever-changing and networked processes [16], time-based digital media which engage people with the emotional materials of digitized representations might ingress narrative form into the shocked feeling of being categorized. Armed with the understanding that representation is not separable from reproduction [17], we know that the aspects of representational media always stand in complex relation to the capacities of reproductive infrastructures. It is perhaps along these lines that the mass media idea of “identity politics” is maligned by many thinkers for its inability to contend with the non-representational capacities of reproduction such as class-based economic relations. However, the narrative form of a game like “Dys4ia”, in which Anthropy recounts the autobiographical story of her transition, demonstrates or images representation at the pixelated digital site of categorization itself.

In writing “Dys4ia” on to the digital interface, Anthropy performs a certain kind of transgression whereby representation and reproduction are revealed in a co-location. Perhaps this performed co-location is why we do cry at this particular website [19]. In this way, queer games might complicate our critical media lens by posing a redux of the aspect and capacity binary. For “Dys4ia,” narrative becomes an aspect to which one can position their body and computer graphics become a capacity for the difficult labor of identification. The labor categories (what we might
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previously have called the bounding meta-narratives) which traditionally typified reproductive capacitation or decapacitation are maybe being recast here strategically as representational aspects. Likewise, the graphical aspects of representation which traditionally naturalized labor are recast here as reproductive, perhaps even sovereign, capacities. Put wobbly but also rather succinctly, Dys4ia presents representation as a narrative aspect and identification as a graphical capacity. The cultural surface of representational aspect and the biological depth of evolutionary capacity are inverted here in a sense to give way to a disruption of a supposed aspect-capacity equity/synchrony between digital culture and biological time. This inversion doubles performatively to situate trans identity as a story within the digital multiplex of networked media. If able, the gamer is then engaged in to the specific duration of one representational identity among the multiplex. What is profoundly interesting is the form through which Dys4ia resists the sort of analogical relation of viewer and screen evidenced by topological flocking or swarming computational media and its pretension to immersion, learning, and/or embodiment. The depth of representational identity is conveyed here as a specific narrative posed in an architectural relation between the gamer and networked screen. This architectural relation positions the gamer in a distance to representational identity, thereby sequestering complexity for their own capacity to identify or disidentify with networked media in general.

Thus, if representational identity is caught in to a dynamic relation between aspects and capacities, architectonic formulations of representation such as intersectionality become directly relevant to the politics of reproduction. In this way, queer games unearth the ways in which identity politics may be more viable modes of political intervention today than are the supposedly transgressive models of generative aesthetics or even emergent insurrection, particularly – and here ironically – in considerations of emancipative technics or critical computational media. The question I bring with me to the study and practice of computational media is therefore on how to be with identity, on the development of techniques with which to write on the walls of the identity politik and as to what capacities of communality emerge afterwards. The development of such techniques should, in my opinion, start from the tradition of queer games artists and their forms rather than from the detournment or study of generative techniques in the computer sciences.

My brief analysis here of Anna Anthropy’s performative co-locating of representational labor and reproductive sovereignty in “Dys4ia” highlights a degree to which sovereignty and labor coincide in the digital matrices of networked identity and can become observed internally and
externally via the frame of narrative. The academy’s many theorizations of surveillance capitalism, and the “control” and “measuring” of subjects’ feelings and dispositions, have indicated how subjects are required today to produce for themselves the very representations with which they can identify. In my view, however, the hasty dismissal of representation as an actual political arena by many scholars working on contemporary politics has led to a failure by researchers and practitioners to observe the digital-graphical means by which the possibility of a subject’s self-identification is continually displaced into “measurement”. By situating games [20] and even algorithms [21] within a visual cultural domain of critique, scholars with training in representational culture can level a more refined critical lens on the digital-graphical capacities of contemporary mechanisms of control without missing the utility of digital representation as a legitimate site in which identification and labor can be co-located and set up for intervention.

**Practical Methods**

While studying towards the doctorate degree, I will propose that “virtual currencies” such as “Crypto-Assets” [22], MMORPG objects [23], and/or “Value Added Services” (VAS) [24] - as core digital-graphical features of measured and monetized online social interaction - must be considered not only through the political economic and media philosophical registers of networked processes, but equally as much through the frame of visual culture and intersectional representation. Within this claim, we hold to the contention that a philosophical critique of representation cannot function today without an acknowledgement of the structural *actuality* of representational phenomena as operationalized by the biological, martial, and psychological sectors of informatic globalization.
By approaching the question of narrative digital identity, we can build on the social and political prescience of a media studies framework through an added interdisciplinary study of the psychosocial dynamics of a narrative account of the self and its heterogenous framings in gender, race, class, ability, and area. I wish to stress here that this methodology may promote a more expansive and complex account of contemporary globalization and infrastructure then might a generativist focus on algorithmic, electronic, or aesthetical cases. Extending here to the question of research-creation and studio practice, I ask further as to what degree these “virtual currencies” and their psychosocial intricacies can be narratively queered in ways similar to the forms of games like “Dys4ia”. Researching the time-based tendencies of currency through a visual cultural study of money, I ask what might happen if we take on the queer work [25] of actually making Crypto-Assets, MMORPG objects, and VAS’s in ways that engage the transacting parties, human and/or
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non-human, in to the emotional depth of their reciprocal durationally-specific histories? In other words, what might a clinical and psychotherapeutic model of currency be? Through a sustained practice in 2D and 3D Game Design using software such as Unity, Blender, Processing, MAX/MSP, and Agisoft Metashape and a concerted engagement with the computer graphics of screen interfaces, I seek to study the intersection of narrative identity with the pixels, voxels, and texels of screens through time-based techniques such as compositing, motion-lag, photogrammetry, musical scoring, and gameplay narration. Further, I seek also to research and develop further proficiency in certain aspects of gameplay programming such as “loot” or “inventory” systems and platform-specific languages and workflows such as Solidity, Facebook Games, and WeChat and Twitter’s API’s. I propose, lastly, to continue to research similar workflows, languages, and platforms and their related legal and technical aspects as they develop during the progression of my degree.

**Relevant Literature**

Literature relevant to this research fans across several fields. My primary reading is in Pyschosocial Studies, Critical Ethnic Studies, Media Studies, Queer Theory and Game Studies as well as to some degree in 20th century French Philosophy. My core interlocutors across these areas are Gilles Deleuze, Sylvia Wynter, Alexander R. Galloway, and Bracha L. Ettinger. I also find core work in David Marriott’s reading of Frantz Fanon between Black Studies and Psychoanalysis and in Thomas LaMarre’s reading of Japanese anime and game media. Soraya Murray’s text on Video Games has introduced me to a visual cultural studies methodology. Lois Mcnay’s consideration of narrative identity in Gender Studies and discussion of Paul Ricoer as well as M. M. Bahktin and Walter Benjamin’s perspectives on narrative are core to my increasing interest in narrative. Virginia Woolf will forever be the most intelligent author I have ever read. Kalindi Vora and Neda Atanasoski’s application of a Critical Ethnic Studies framework to the study of automation as well as their discussion of Hortense Spillers in Surrogate Humanity is crucially informative for my method. While Luciana Parisi’s analyses tend towards the over-intellectual, I think she may be the most complex author in Media Studies and I appreciate her application of Alfred N. Whitehead philosophy of time as well as her discussion of Denise Ferreira Da Silva in the context of artificial intelligence. I hold similar sentiments for her colleague Beatrice Fazi. My
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reading of Deleuze is informed greatly by Eric Alliez. I am particularly interested in his— as well as by Emanuele Coccia’s— discussions of the image. In this register, Laura Kurgan and Shannon Mattern, as well as to a certain degree Katherine N. Hayles and Mark Hansen, inform my understanding of infrastructure. I read Orit Halpern’s *Beautiful Data* as the key history of cybernetics in the context of design throughout its political, psychological, infrastructural, and aesthetic studies. While my reading in Queer Theory is relatively lacking, I hold close to Jose Munoz’s perspective on affect and identification as well as to Eve Sedgewick’s analysis of paranoid reading, Elizabeth Freeman’s queer temporalities, and Karen Barad’s investigation of spacetimemattering. Jan Jagodzinski informs my arts-research and to some degree clinical perspective, while Erin Manning and Brian Massumi and Xin Wei Sha have all been central in my finding and conceptualizing of Research-Creation.

**Outcomes**

I consider that my doctorate work will be foremostly in the intellectual, professional, and emotional expansion of my commitment to community, healing, and caring. I hope in the broad sense that my research and continued growth can contribute to increased understanding of the role of clinical practice in both research-creation and in media and political studies. I ask here in a mere proposal, what ever happened to those authors like Frantz Fanon, Felix Guattari, and Bracha Ettinger who consider seriously the duty of the clinical? Or even, what ever happened to the clinic; if not even to its idea of itself? As I seek to answer these questions within the irreducible digital specificities of today’s political situation, I contend that my research will contribute more directly to an expansion of the clinical in Research-Creation discourse through and alongside an intensified encounter between Psychosocial Studies and Media Studies. By rehabilitating the concept of narrative identity for the study of media, I think I can open up practical avenues for the psychosocial authors through a digital model of the clinic and theoretical avenues for media authors through a synthesized study of narrative identity and digital infrastructure. Additionally, through a comparative analysis of narrative and digital infrastructure, my intention is to offer the notion of the clinical as a categorical alternative to the impasse between the two dominant praxical positions in contemporary media studies, “blockage” and “instrumentality” [26]. For many, “instrumentality” names a theoretical affirmation of the utility of technology to a leftist politics whereas “blockage” names a theoretical critique or repression of such a utility. Whereas the former
promotes the research and implementation of theoretically informed conceptualizations of “utility” in order to produce an alterior and emancipatory technology, the latter considers that any form of “utilization” is already entwined with the omnicidal forces of “Climate, Control, and Capitalism” [27] and as such technological literacy should be oriented in a praxis of blocking all kinds of circulation. It is possible, in my opinion, that this antagonism between the “blockage” and “instrumentality” praxes can be interrupted by a notion of the clinical in which narrative identity and infrastructure are approached as structurally combined. In doing so, we can consider this combined structure from a more global perspective in which Critical Ethnic and Black Studies can temper the universalizing tendency of the “blockage” position by reminding us that not all experiences and identities have relied or currently rely on the feeling of possibility or potential. And, moreover, that even in not dwelling in possibility, these people are no less alive. More abstractly, it is possible that the mysteriousness of emergence can be emotionally balanced, sat with, or understood by recognizing life as specifiable and diverse through the narrative framing of durations and experiences. Philosophically, it is perhaps the case that Gilles Deleuze’s last essay, “Immanence: A Life”, written months before he died, gestures in some ways towards this position. He says, “My wound existed before me: not a transcendence of the wound as higher actuality, but its immanence as a virtuality always within a milieu (plane or field)” [28]. Deleuze might have said that a life is already always a “blockage”, or that a wound is a story, insofar as it is always with us, wherever we go. I hope that these course of research can lead in three directions: towards the publishing of a book of some kind, towards a Research-Creation project with meaningful impacts on people’s lives, particularly for those who are hurting, and towards meeting many peers and colleagues and mentors who are interested in similar work and who I can count myself among as a team.

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