

Humanity's Noise in *Network Effect*

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The physical distance between a viewer and a painting provides opportunity for meticulous, steady observation, and Foucault's analysis of Las Meninas in 1966 was largely facilitated by a visual reading. Fifty years later, however, digital interfaces may be counted among our cultural objects. One of these is Network Effect (networkeffect.io), which could also be construed as a collage, a criticism, and a framework. In this essay, I apply Foucault's method of inquiry toward this piece as a means to explore what we know in the context of multimodal digital interfaces – those that involve sound and gesture as well as static and kinetic visual elements – and the ways our linear written language might support such an analysis.

data-driven plasticity

As with *Las Meninas*, a physical distance persists between a viewer and the screen displaying *Network Effect*, but embodied interaction with a machine becomes an essential part of the reading:

The sound of an artificial heartbeat begins when we click START: *Boum boum... boum boum...* Video clips, each one second in length, appear on screen in succession. Each clip contains a person or group engaged in an activity. When clicking on a moving image, the footage visually twists and glitches and the words ‘more more more’ appear on screen, with each click, as if they are kinetic fragments of shattered glass. The video imagery is partially obscured as we scroll down the page, and we see a rapid flow of pixelated, jagged waves of distorted images. We cannot determine where these clips are from or determine what we're viewing, but we can continue scrolling and clicking. The moving image pulses in sync with the continuing heartbeat sound. [*Boum boum...*] The screen feels alive and there's a countdown in the middle of it. It is not filled with a single story, but with many stories. [*Boum boum... boum boum...*] A horizontal string of keywords is visible near the top of the screen. We find that we don't

understand any of this content yet our ears continue to listen, our eyes keep examining the screen, and our hands are compelled to scroll and click. Scroll, click, discover. Scroll, click, and the countdown and heartbeat sound remain constant.

Jonathan Harris and Greg Hochmuth, the creators of *Network Effect*, provide us with extensive site credits by means of a link at the bottom left of the screen. From this we learn that their project concerns data, social networks, and their effects on humanity. Various sets of data used within the framework grew from an initial list of 100 verbs that describe “corporeal” human activities (rather than “cerebral”, both terms used by the artists). We also learn how the data was sourced or compiled, which tools were used to build the project, and we discover how geography and IP address are used in tandem for the countdown that will, upon reaching zero, prevent us from revisiting the site for twenty-four hours. However, this authorial emphasis on the artists’ intentions may inadvertently remove power from both the interface (an object) and us (its consumers). In this reading and analysis, the site credits are set aside and focus is placed on our experience of the interface and its contents. *Network Effect* displays our collective episteme relative to the internet through societal preoccupations with connectivity, (re)production, and data access, and as a result of the human interactions required to engage with these things.

performs the noise

We have learned how to engage with digital interfaces through finger and thumb gestures that activate a pointing tool, and this knowledge has become nearly intuitive. A trackpad is used to guide the pointing tool on a laptop computer, for example, and we know that a tap or swipe of a finger will activate parts of the screen on our smartphones. Clicking and scrolling always yield ‘more’.

Physically and intellectually, the performative interaction between body and machine amplifies our individual plasticity, and as we shape these experiences, they in turn shape us. On a more massive population scale, this simple activity results in cultural and societal transformation. *Network Effect* brings us into well-known digital territory and requires no new tools or techniques to use it. Within the interface, the artists have provided concrete organization based on keywords, and a consistent handling of data. Nonetheless, our gestures trigger

content-rich media that appear chaotic and discontinuous through at least four different modes of interaction: visual, audial, textual, and movement. As our fingers scroll and tap through the continuous datastream, our eyes see an array of familiar and new images, our minds attempt to process these things, and our ears adhere to the visceral rhythmic reminder of humanness overlaid with messy spoken word. Awareness of these gestures and senses expose our intimate correspondence with the machine. The experience of *Network Effect*, disruptive rather than harmonious, is immersion into an object that is both a progenitor and a product of human noise:

Single-click. The screen shifts to display a horizontal stream of visually obscured keywords, and the one we've selected is in white type. At the lower right, the countdown continues. The center of the screen is black and sound of a heartbeat remains steady and unchanged. [*Boum boum... boum boum...*] *Single-click 'play'.* New video clips, each one second in length, once again appear in succession and on a continuous loop. We can hear phrases spoken by different voices, all interfering and overlapping with one another; the heartbeat sound continues, unaffected. The visual and audial data seem to conflict with one another and this artist-configured media alliance fills our experience with discord. *Click, click, click.* The words 'more more more' appear again, and as we click faster, those words appear smaller but with increasing frequency. The video twists and bends to become a cacophony of moving lines, colors, and textures. Messages are altered by means of their own media – and we, the readers, are manipulating the transmission. The screen is something unclear, broken, and 'wrong', yet visually compelling. With a single click we pause and the spoken word audio ceases. The video freezes yet continues to pulse in sync with the heartbeat sound. [*Boum boum... boum boum...*]

with devotion to humanity

The histories behind each video clip, audio track, URL, and piece of text provide minimal context and perspective. The presence of audio is equally enticing and disorienting. As soon as we attempt to understand these things — which are experienced almost simultaneously — other data bits obscure and interfere with our performance of the interface, leaving us caught between considering an escape and wanting to discover more of its secrets.

The interface displays a deep form of human compassion, by its producers and for its users, and reminds us that our online behaviors affect us intellectually and physically. Feelings of overload, anxiety, and fatigue prompted by the datastream and juxtaposed media are likely familiar to anyone immersed in social media. *Network Effect* confronts us with an obsession toward processing data as part of everyday commerce. Curiously, it does not allow us to perform human online behaviors such as creating, sharing, and participating; these are the very things we know to be part of social media and they also happen to be the source material for some of the project's data content. Our social media experiences typically provide us with a sense of freedom to share ourselves and our interests with anyone who might pay attention, or with no one. Here, we are not able to "favorite" or "like" or "hide" what we experience, nor can we leave a comment. In the absence of a "social" connection, *Network Effect* submerges us into a datastream in which we are spectators in the midst of sensory overload.

quietly, it transmits

This presents a contradiction: experiencing the interface requires our knowledge relative to the internet, and yet it prevents us from responding in ways that we know to be typically available within that environment. We are not closely connected with these people on screen nor do we recognize their voices. If we experience this noise, and are not able to share our reactions, what happens to our psyche? How do we make meaning with this datastream of media? With each interaction, we find more questions — How? Who? Why? — and *Network Effect* provides few answers:

Single-click: The video continues to play and a timeline of the keyword's use in literature appears below. *Single-click*: The countdown, video, and audio remain steady but the timeline is replaced with a numbered list of product brand names appear in a single column with a number of votes next to it. *Single-click*: We see two people hugging in a shopping mall. The screen glitches, and we see a person holding a sign for free hugs. We hear multiple voice recordings at once, including one that says "hugging is a technique / ...I hug when there is absolutely nothing else I can do..." [*Boum boum... boum boum...*].

Suddenly, the screen changes without a single gesture. The data disappear and the countdown has ceased. We're out of time. We see an image of clouds in the sky overlaid with a quote by Carl Jung. A meditative, bell-like sound can be heard in the distance. This narrative of *Network Effect* has unfolded as a criticism of our own behaviors, and also as a sort of love letter to a feeling that arrives when we are forced back into our own familiar worlds. Escaping this digital landscape of humanity's noise returns us to the quiet of our own heartbeats.

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Author's note: The four subheadings in this article were written to be read together, sequentially, as a short piece of verse.