

The Machine Doesn't Care

Jordan Bartee

I'm on the tail end of a generation for whom the look and sound of 8-bit video game systems has become intrinsically linked to notions of childhood and memory. We grew up playing these video games, some of us playing them everyday for many years. When you surround yourself with something so much as a child all sorts of circumstantial experience gets linked to it in your memory as an adult. When we see or hear anything 8-bit we are immediately reminded of our childhood homes, the sleepover parties we had with our friends, our mothers' sandwiches, and a whole other mess of nostalgic half-memories.

Because of this phenomenon computer technology of the 1980's becomes something highly exploitable from an artistic standpoint. Not only does it serve as a kind of aesthetic trigger for childhood, but it also calls into question the nature of our childhoods in relation to technology and technological progress. The fact that these devices have been technologically surpassed is especially important to consider. These objects that we loved as children are now being thrown away en masse to make way for the next generation of consumer electronics. It is not a gigantic leap of association to look at these heaps of discarded floppy discs, computers, gaming systems and toys as heaps of human memory. In a very real way our childhoods have been made into something obsolete by way of our participation in a technocratic culture that generates a staggering amount of excess and waste. We have a lot invested in this waste, but we throw it away anyway. Why?

The gigantic LED ridden arrow of progress dictates that the new is superior to the old *by virtue of* its newness. We throw old systems away because we are convinced that the replacements will be better. What we don't realize until later is that in the experiential realm of our childhoods, technological progress

didn't matter, and it matters even less in the realm of memory we experience now as adults. No one throws away a collection of photographs because digital photography is better than Polaroid —what's important is the meaning attached to the photographs, which is to say the content that the technology houses or the memory that it triggers.

And so for this generation there is a kind of quest for these lost artifacts of our youth. They were lost because our parents discarded them, or they died when their components finally failed; or we sold them or gave them away. Now we remember them and want them back so we can reconnect with our childhoods in some way, in essence to re-experience all this vested meaning bound up in our old Nintendos and Segas.

Enter circuit bending, an artistic discipline that is both a part of this attempt at reconnection and a critique of it. Circuit benders take techno-artifacts that everyone else considers garbage and transform them into something current, living, and aesthetic. Bending helps us step out of the arrow of progress for a moment and critically evaluate notions of obsolescence, time, and memory. This ability to create a dialogue about time and memory is not only by way of association however; it turns out that the act of circuit bending itself contains inherent analogies to the manner in which human memory functions.

The field of neuroscience tells us that human memory doesn't occur in some single portion of the brain. In order to recall an event the entire brain must reconfigure itself into a perfect series of interconnected on/off states, much like a circuit board. The notoriously liquid nature of memory has to do with a degradation of the schematics used to order the circuit. In theory every event ever experienced should be immediately retrievable in perfect detail if only we had the right code, the right key, the right configuration.

What happens with circuit bent video game systems is almost exactly similar. All the raw data you need is stored on the cartridge, intact. It's all there, but it's useless unless it can be decoded by the machine's circuitry in order to be realized and experienced—to be remembered. But by changing the nature of the decoding circuitry that data ends up becoming corrupted, radically changed and twisted out of its original form. Watching or listening to a bent gaming system is like watching someone struggling to recall a distant event from memory —little snippets come through but the whole has been distorted.

What's really interesting is that computers and digital electronics in general can be seen as a kind of memory-extending tool for human beings. This is after all predominantly how they are used. We have them remember our contacts for us, keep track of our photo collections, home movies, and music. Increasingly they are becoming a virtual suppository for the collected memory of mankind in general, serving as a vast information database that is at least partially archival in nature.

These memory-keeping machines are wearing increasingly friendly faces, getting smoother, brighter, and more transparent. Appropriately we therefore trust more and more in their capacity to remember things for us, to show us *exactly* how things were, and in no small sense to be the stewards of our cultural and intellectual truths. When they malfunction in some way it's as if the curtain has been pulled back on the Wizard of Oz; suddenly all that memory is revealed “as the machine sees it,” as raw bits of data flying around between integrated circuits. The machine *doesn't care*. To the machine everything collapses into the assembly code. Everything is just a 0 or a 1. There are no grounds to distinguish a picture of a loved one from the latest single on the top 10; in the data stream everything is equivalent.

We might admit some degree of unrest upon the realization that all the meaning we invest in the content kept by these machines

finally emerges as something profoundly fragile, utterly reliant on delicate and highly complex systems to decode the raw data into a form that we can digest. The real disturbance however comes when we see the condemning digital finger pointing squarely back at us.

Because these machines are so analogous to our own brains in the way they deal with memory, it becomes clear that our *brains don't care* about the meaning of memory either. The brain is after all exactly similar, a fragile and complex system that must be perfectly organized in order to remember. As old age sets in, or some trauma occurs, our fleshy decoding circuits end up scrambling things, forgetting crucial details, or inserting details were there weren't any.

It starts to feel as if the entire concept of memory is actually a gigantic incoherent mess of an idea. If our brains are like decoding circuits, and it's true that in the proper sense they don't care about the memories they are decoding—which is to say, the brain is just organizing bits in a kind of organic integrated circuit, oblivious to the ultimate meaning the memories may contain or provoke—we must then ask the question: who does the caring? To whom are these memories important? Who feels the pain of an old trauma or giggles about an old inside joke? Where is the memory? Where is the meaning?

Circuit bending brings these series of ontological questions to the fore in a manner that is visceral and direct. Although we might not be explicitly conscious of these questions when viewing, listening to, or interacting with circuit bent art, they still manage to get under our skin in some manner. Observing a digital machine malfunction is inherently unsettling to us in an age where we rely on these machines for so much. Hence the common reaction: “What are you doing? You're just breaking it! Stop doing that, this machine could go to good use!” The sound

and look of corrupt data, bit-reduced and scrambled beyond recognition, has become the unlikely sound of a new technological apocalypse that implicates the whole of our convictions regarding memory, time, meaning and identity. As we continue to march forward on the arrow of progress, circuit bent art is one of a very few voices urging us to stop for a moment and consider where exactly that glowing, enticing arrow is leading us.



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