

JONATHAN HARRIS IN DISCUSSION WITH ANDY CAMERON

I first met Jonathan Harris in 2003. He was fresh out of Princeton where he'd been studying Computer Science and Statistics. I was head of Interactive at Fabrica, the Benetton Communication Research centre near Venice and Jonathan was interested in doing a fellowship at Fabrica to develop his artistic practice. I couldn't believe my luck — I offered him a bursary halfway through that first meeting. It wasn't just that Jon's technical and mathematical skills were shockingly good — what impressed me most of all was his seriousness of purpose in thinking through and working out a vision of a new kind of art — art made out of lots and lots of data.

Installed in the idyllic surroundings of Fabrica Jonathan started working on 10 x 10—his breakthrough piece as an artist and the piece which paved the way for the monumental We Feel Fine, created with Sep Kamvar shortly after leaving Italy.

What I remember most about Jonathan in those early years at Fabrica are the discussions we had together — the back and forth, the working through of arguments about art and technology in an exchange of ideas. I'm delighted — and honoured — to be able to continue this process of discussion and exchange to mark Jonathan's first solo exhibition.

First, aesthetics. How do we think about art which is new, which is doing new things with new techniques? How do we judge it, how do we make sense of it and how do we ascribe value to it? What happens when the technology of art changes and new things happen? For example, how do we think about the aesthetics of interactivity - the opportunity for a representation to speak back, as it were, to the audience. This is a new thing - a new category of beauty as Myron Krueger put it - and it demands a new aesthetics because it doesn't work in the same way, doesn't do the same thing, as a painting does, or a photograph does.

As a measurement, the simplest rule I can imagine is that the art should be consistent with itself. Meaning, the art should establish a symbolic (not programming) language of its own, and it should follow that language in every detail — from the largest to the smallest. This is not consistency for its own sake, but consistency as a signal for a complete and well-understood point of view, which you might also call a voice.

Especially with digital work, where the creator is usually more removed from the original act of expression than a writer or painter would be (i.e. code is abstract, while words and pictures are direct), having such a consistent voice is doubly important, because that voice — that consistency — is the only thing in the work that indicates the presence of the artist. Without this voice, the data-based digital artist is more like an interior decorator or librarian, than like an artist. So this voice is very important. This “voice” is not the same as “style”. Aesthetic style is part of voice, but voice is much more — it is a whole conceptual framework for self-expression — a way of understanding the world, posing questions and depicting answers.

There are only a few digital artists whose work I can immediately identify on sight — Yugo Nakamura, Casey Reas, Golan Levin and maybe a few others. Their work is identifiable because their work is precise — it is consistent with itself. Even when mediums evolve very quickly, and when a critical sense of “aesthetic quality” has yet to emerge, a sensitive eye can usually spot consistency, and the presence of consistency is often a clue that there is good work happening therein. So consistency is like an early warning signal. This idea of consistency also occurs among writers and filmmakers, who design worlds where every detail must feel like it belongs, and if there is a detail that does not belong, the illusion immediately collapses. The same is true with programming digital worlds and experiences — the illusions are fragile and can easily collapse if there are weak elements. When new worlds emerge, they often require new languages. Likewise, when new languages emerge, they often create new worlds. Artists need to work both sides of this equation. When culture changes, the old languages are often very bad at describing the new culture. For instance, oil paintings about the Internet seem very silly to me. When there is a new culture that needs to be described by artists, it is often good to use pieces of that culture to do the describing. That is why work about the Internet should draw from the Internet, use the language of the Internet, and be presented on the Internet — the native land will always be most natural.

It's really interesting to hear your thoughts on 'voice'. It makes complete sense to talk of the internal consistency of an articulation — and the sense of a coherent 'character' behind the articulation. At the same time I'm struck by a sort of paradox here — one of the things which defines interactive and generative art is the extent to which the artist isn't really making an articulation — in a sense isn't actually saying anything, or at least, not making 'statements' in the traditional sense. A writer makes up statements like 'the horse stood in the field' and the painter also makes statements visually — summoning things into existence through the illusion of paint on canvas. What you do — in common with other interactive and generative artists, is to stand at once removed from the articulated statement — instead focusing on a way to provide a context for the statements of others, to frame the statements of others.

This, it seems, to me is the essence of the new languages which you describe — that the artist is once-removed from making a direct statement. So it's not really self-expression in the old sense. Now, I completely agree with you that certain interactive and generative artists — like Levin or Nakamura — make work which is recognisably theirs. But when Levin, for example, makes a sound reactive which responds to other people's voices — and which only exists in a sense when other people speak, it makes the notion of the artist's voice that much more difficult to pin down.

The dilemma you point out is fascinating, and could be the crux of many of the problems facing interactive work (the art world doesn't take it seriously, the interactive artist can't find out how to translate his personal experience and suffering into his work, interactive artists sometimes seem interchangeable, etc.).

When you are not a maker of gestures but a maker of frames, then as a frame-maker, you compete on how clever you are in choosing good frames, and on the craftsmanship of the frames you end up creating, but not on the originality and emotional resonance of the actual work, because the actual work is what's inside the frame (in this case, the data), and not the frame that contains it. It's almost like the artists here are not the people like me (who make the frames), but the millions of individuals whose words and pictures show up inside the frames I make.

On the other hand, I love Chekov's idea that the role of the artist is not to answer questions, but rather to pose them fairly. In this sense, the formulation of statements is unimportant — even presumptuous. Instead, it is the ability to pose interesting questions (i.e. create good frames) that defines the artist in the Chekovian sense, interactive artists are right on the money!

When I was younger, I made a lot of projects that tried to deal with very big themes (*10 x 10*, the *Yahoo! Time Capsule*, even *We Feel Fine*), but as I get a bit older, I realize how little I really know, and those early projects now seem brash and immature — even a little tacky. At the ripe old age of 31, I'm more interested in posing good questions than in offering answers.

As for your point about Levin's sound-reactive works only existing when other people speak — that's true, yet still, there is a particular worldview that Levin possesses which dictates the design of his frames, and you can see that worldview (goofy, playful, beautifully crafted) in the situations he designs. Even if he is not making 'statements', you can still read his worldview in his frames (even in his annual Holiday cards), and his worldview is consistent.

Another aspect of the question of aesthetics connects to the emerging field of data visualisation. What is the aesthetic of data? How is the aesthetic of data linked to function? What makes data beautiful?

Making data beautiful requires beautiful data. Data cannot be made beautiful by design or by anything else. Data can be made pretty by design, but this is a superficial prettiness, like a boring woman wearing too much makeup. Design can only reveal beauty that already exists — hidden beauty — usually by eliminating clutter and rearranging elements. In this way, design is more like makeup remover than makeup.

I do not consider data visualization to be an artistic genre. It is a tool that has become fashionable, and so it has grown beyond its purpose, claiming an outsize self-importance. Most data visualization work is not interesting because most data is not interesting.

When Sep and I were making *We Feel Fine* and *I Want You To Want Me*, we operated under the premise that the underlying data, presented in plain text format, had to be very beautiful, or else we would not include it. Once we had found data like this, the various visualizations were just playful frameworks for revealing different aspects of that data. But the data had to be beautiful to begin with — that's the part most people forget. It is the same with my photo-based works, like *The Whale Hunt* and *Today* — if the underlying photos are not good, the final interactive projects will not be good.

I think of data visualization as a particular technique for expressing particular types of secrets — specifically, superficial secrets that hide on the surface of things (the secrets of charts and graphs and maps and numbers). These are easy secrets, so most data visualization is quite shallow, expressively speaking.

There are other types of secrets — I call them “inner secrets” — and these secrets cannot be touched by data visualization. These inner secrets have to do with the heart or soul or subtle essence of things, and they can only be accessed through solitude, contemplation and personal experience. After making a number of data-based projects I became conscious of this limitation, and so recently I have turned more towards real experience (i.e. *The Whale Hunt*, *Balloons of Bhutan*, *Today*), to try to access these other types of secrets. They are much harder to find, but much richer when you actually find them, because they are things that other people can use to deepen their understanding of their own lives. As an artist, if you stumble upon one of these secrets, it is an incredible gift to you and to others, and it can make for very powerful work.

I was interested in your statement that the beauty of ‘beautiful data’ comes from the data itself — that some data is intrinsically beautiful, or at least more interesting, than other data. And I was fascinated to hear that you and Sep, when making *We Feel Fine*, set out in the first instance to identify beautiful data. I have to ask — how do you decide if data is beautiful or not? What are the aesthetic criteria you bring to bear on raw data? How do you know beautiful data when you see it?

You have to feel it in your gut. There’s no checklist, and even if there were a checklist, it would quickly become obsolete, because it has something to do with originality and strangeness. You have to find data that people have never seen before, but which feels totally familiar when they see it, like you’re showing people a part of themselves. This is the kind of data that feels beautiful. It is illuminating, surprising and personally resonant. I’m always searching for things that are simultaneously familiar and strange — those are the most powerful things.

Much of your work is about providing your audience with a tool — a software application. How can we reconcile use value with aesthetic value? What happens for example when somebody goes to *We Feel Fine* and starts interrogating the system — looking for women feeling wistful or whatever — because we’ve got quite a complicated thing going on here — we’ve got you and Sep as the artists, giving the audience — me — the opportunity to connect with a lot of other people in ways which are really quite interesting. So, where’s the art? Where is the art situated within this complex set of interrelationships?

The art is the whole thing — all of it.

We Feel Fine is a piece of portraiture with many interacting elements. Visual aesthetics are only a very small part — probably the least interesting part.

It is more about creating an ever-changing portrait of the emotional landscape of the human world. It is about creating a two-way mirror — where viewers simultaneously experience a God-like voyeurism (spying on the feelings of others) and a bashful vulnerability (realizing their own words and pictures are in there, too). When these two feelings mix together (voyeurism and vulnerability), the hope is that they produce a kind of humbling empathy — demonstrating that individual experiences are actually universal.

Another interesting aspect of *We Feel Fine* is mass authorship. There are now over 14 million feelings in the database, coming from about 4 million individuals, and they deserve to be authors of the piece as much as me and Sep. If the sentences in *We Feel Fine* (written by others) were not so poignant, the piece would be much weaker — it would be less about humanity and more about the impressive acrobatics of data visualization (which would be a selfish, superficial, short-lived goal). *We Feel Fine* is now more than five years old, but it still feels quite contemporary, and I believe this timelessness comes from the candor of the sentences, not from the way it is designed. Beautiful self-expression is timeless.

The notion of mass authorship is a fascinating one — and absolutely central to what you do. One can almost think of it as the defining preoccupation of your oeuvre — this balancing of your authorial voice (which is always very clear) and the contributions of thousands and thousands of anonymous collaborators, each with a voice of their own. Now, this is not something which is unique to your work — it’s also arguably the defining preoccupation of the age we live in — the shift from the few-to-many broadcast model of communication to a peer-to-peer model where authorship is much more diffuse and widely shared — but also messier, less coherent, less consistent.

Did you set out to do work which has this over arching contemporary resonance? Is this important to you?

Back in 2003, when I was working with you at Fabrica, I remember feeling how non-special I was, and how silly it would be to encapsulate my own particular thoughts and opinions in my work, and how it would be much better to harvest and incorporate the thoughts and opinions of millions of others. Just as I thought I wasn’t special, I also thought that no one else was special, so the only sane thing seemed to be to put everyone on equal ground, with equal voice, and that some kind of ‘universal truth’ would emerge from that. This is similar to the idea of the Internet as a global brain, where people are interchangeable and individuals don’t matter — only the aggregate matters.

Back in 2003, I was enamored with this idea. I think it appealed to the insecure geek in me, who liked the idea that I could learn all there was to know about life from sitting at my desk and designing clever programs — the ultimate revenge of the nerd!

Now I think this approach is deeply flawed, very limited, and dangerous to us as individuals, even as it grows in popularity and acceptance (wisdom of the crowds, etc.).

When people are viewed in the aggregate, individual humans matter less and less, and when systems are designed to deal with the aggregate, those systems become damaging to individuals. As such systems grow in scale and adoption, you start to see the mass homogenization of human identity (everyone filling out the same profiles, choosing from the same dropdown menus, etc.), which is what we're seeing today in the digital world.

The idea that you can learn about life from data is wrong. The only way to learn about life is from life (but this truth is terrifying to programmers, who prefer to sit at desks).

That is why now, I am much more interested in working from real life — incorporating my own personal experience (*The Whale Hunt, Today*, etc.) and designing platforms to activate other people's real personal experience (*Cowbird*) — than in passively harvesting large data sets, as I did in my earlier work.

When you interrogate large data sets for universal truths, you end up with a statistical mush that offers vague, blurry, superficial insights (everyone falls in love, everyone gets mad, everyone eats breakfast, etc.). When you're hunting down the universal, the best approach is actually to study the specific and extrapolate — in that way, any insights you find will be grounded in something real. The personal is powerful.

I'm interested in the notion of sense or meaning in your work, the way in which it appears to be trying to make sense of very large and very complicated sets of data. Linked to this is the idea of 'movements' in *We Feel Fine* as different kinds of sense or meaning — from the initial madness of "Madness", with the mass represented as a proper mass, without meaning, chaotic and messy, through "Murmurs", "Montage", "Mobs", "Metrics" and "Mounds". Each one is giving a different perspective on the data, a different slice. And each has a very different aesthetic feel about it. What were you trying to do here?

I have always been quite OCD as a person (it runs in my family), and probably the main impulse in my life has been to try to control life's chaos by spotting patterns and organizing the noise all around me. In my personal life I do this with plans, lists, routines and projects, and I think you can see this impulse carried over into my work.

With *We Feel Fine*, I saw so many different interesting sides of the data — ranging from emotive to analytical — and I could not choose just one at the expense of all the others. So there are six movements that each explore a different aspect of the data:

- 1) "Montage" lets you see photos of real people — this is the most human and empathetic part of the piece.
- 2) "Madness" mimics the feeling of living in a large city and constantly shifting between total anonymity and extreme intimacy, and what that changing of emotional scales does to an individual — I was living in NYC when I designed that movement, and it really encapsulates how I was feeling living there.
- 3) "Murmurs" allows you to be passive and witness a scrolling wall of human expression — the Godlike experience begins here.
- 4) "Mobs" is a whimsical way to introduce the idea of statistics into a storytelling context, without being too technical — the God like sense is back, here in the form of numbers, appealing to the popular belief that "only if I have enough data, then I will understand" (which is a deeply flawed belief).
- 5) "Metrics" appeals to the hyper-rational, analytical mind — humans are just numbers now.
- 6) "Mounds" is a playful way of summarizing an entire database — the individual sentences are most abstracted here.

So the movements range from God-like voyeurism / emotional mind, to God-like omniscience / rational mind, but again, together, trying to produce a weird kind of empathy for the human condition, so that viewers end up feeling less like Gods and more like humans.

You've spoken in the past about surveillance and self exposure. Your work seems to be about a kind of poetics of surveillance, finding patterns, creating beauty out of this enormous mass of self-published material.

Yes, I think there is some of that. I'm not so interested in surveillance as such, in any kind of Orwellian way — at least not like some other artists are. For me, surveillance is like data visualization — another contemporary tool we have in our culture, which we can use as artists to say things about our world. Surveillance gets a bad rap (CIA, wiretapping, etc.), but surveillance can also be used to uncover incredible beauty. It can be used to humanize — not just dehumanize — individuals.

It's curious that you see surveillance as ambiguous — neither good nor bad — but as something which can affirm humanity. In this respect it becomes a kind of anthropology — and a technique for you to uncover humanity and beauty. How do you go about this — I mean what kind of technical decisions do you make to uncover beauty? I guess this connects back to ideas about whether a particular set of data is intrinsically beautiful or not. So, there are ridiculously large amounts of data out there — and you have to make a decision about which subset of it you're interested in. How do you make that decision? I guess I'm interested in how you work with data, in the way other artists work with pigment, or movement, or words or whatever.

I usually start by deciding what kind of thing I want to make a project about (news, emotion, my own life, etc.), and then I think through all the different aspects of that thing that might leave behind a data trail. Then I start wandering through those data trails, and I see what the data looks like. What I'm looking for is something surprising — some weird pattern, some repetition, something that makes me gasp, something I didn't know, something I haven't seen, some strange subtext, etc. I often build analytical tools to help with this process, especially to look for patterns. You start to get a feeling for whether something's going to be interesting or not, and if it looks interesting, then you go deeper.

For the projects that involve real experience (*The Whale Hunt, Balloons of Bhutan, Today*), the process is flipped on its head, because I have to decide beforehand what kind of data I'm going to collect as I go through the experience (temperature, heartbeat, certain questions, etc.). This approach is more about hacking reality and developing hypotheses about which hacks are likely to be interesting. Then I go and put myself in those situations, to see what happens. This is more risky, because you never really know if something will be interesting until you try it.

In both cases, the visual design of the final piece comes much later.

Your work lives on the Internet. Why a gallery show? How does the work differ — online and real world?

I love the Internet as an art platform. I love its openness, ubiquity, accessibility, scale and permanence. I also love the lack of gatekeepers. However, one problem with presenting a body of work on the Internet is the fragmented, schizophrenic, piecemeal thing the work ends up becoming. My various projects are scattered across dozens of websites living at different domains, written in a handful of programming languages, some still collecting data, others frozen in time, and others offline entirely. This makes it very difficult for a viewer (or even for me) to get a sense of the body of work as a whole. I found that seeing the work all together in a gallery has given me a very different sense of it. It feels much more continuous, self-consistent, and slowly evolving than I ever really imagined it to be. I think viewers to the exhibit have the same feeling. Also, we have found that typical visitors to the show are spending 1-2 hours there, while other exhibits at that same gallery usually have visitors spending less than 10 minutes. So there is clearly a tremendous interest for this kind of work to be seen in an art context. The problem is mainly that the art establishment has not yet found a way to think about it and welcome it (not to mention sell it), so it remains largely fringe — a thing of the Web, but not of the "serious" art world.

One of my goals in doing this show was to offer up my work to the art world, to see if it can even have a presence there, or whether I should forget about the art world and just keep publishing my work online. The show has tremendous appeal among the public, but it's unclear what the impact (if any) will be in the art world.

Why do you think electronic art and net art is so disconnected from the broader fine art scene? Do you think this will ever change? Does it matter?

I think people in the art world (especially critics) like to feel elite, like they understand things the rest of us don't. To get anything out of most "good" (i.e. critically acclaimed) contemporary art, you have to have a tremendous amount of domain knowledge or an MFA. This keeps the critics employed, so they can explain the art to the rest of us. With a lot of digital work (including my work), this explanation is not really necessary. Pretty much anyone can understand one of my projects pretty much immediately (which has always been one of my goals). There's a lot of complexity hiding in them, but it's pretty easy to see what's going on right away. I think this approachability scares critics, because there's not much for them to add to the dialogue.

This kind of work, when it's done well, doesn't require tour guides. I think critics feel threatened by it, so they try to avoid it, and say it's not art, so they don't have to deal with it.

If digital art were less understandable, more obscure, more abstract, and did more to reference other existing artworks, critics would probably like it more, because they would have more to say about it. But it's unclear whether this would actually be good for the work — probably not.

[Do you think it's possible — or desirable — to be an artist who works solely on the Internet?](#)

One hard thing is how to make money. The art world is premised on the fetishization and selling of scarce objects. The Internet (and my work) is based on abundance. Indeed, websites are often judged by their number of viewers. An artwork's price is unrelated to its number of viewers. A priceless Picasso can hang over the sofa of a hedge fund manager, 100 people will see it a year, and it will still be a priceless Picasso. So there needs to be a new economic model for artists working online, otherwise they will work elsewhere.

Another problem with the Internet is the glazed-over, "I am looking at a screen now" mindset that people go into when they are staring into a monitor and clicking with their mouse. This deadened, distracted, passive mindset (largely brought about by addictive social networking tools) is not conducive to having deep personal experiences, whether with art or anything else. When I see visitors in a gallery looking at one of my pieces, I can see they are having a deeply personal experience — they are very present, in the moment. When they are at home with their laptops, I am not so sure.

As an artist, I am actually moving away from the Internet. I have been doing more work in the physical world, involving strange personal experiences, largely because life is short and I don't want to spend my whole life sitting behind a screen, and there is much to learn from the real world!

Ultimately, I am not interested in the Internet as a subject. I am interested in real people and real experience as subjects. The Internet is just a place where real people gather, and where real experiences are documented, so it can be a good proxy for this kind of portraiture.

Also, it's a great distribution medium. But no, I'm not married to it.

[Tell me about *The Whale Hunt*. It's different from the other pieces. It's a story. It's time-based, it's a sequence. So, how can data-mining work together with narrative sequence? Is there a contradiction here - between what linguists used to call the paradigm — the set of possibilities, and the syntagm — the sequence of items strung together to form meaning?](#)

The Whale Hunt was really about putting myself in the position of the computer, and assigning myself an algorithm to follow as a program would. After creating so many projects that required computers to follow rules incessantly, I thought it would be good to gain some empathy for the computer, kind of like an energy executive spending some time in the mines, digging up coal, to understand what his business is really about.

So for *The Whale Hunt*, I took photographs at 5-minute intervals for 8 days, and then more frequently when my heartbeat went up, producing 3,214 photographs in all. Once collected, I tagged and classified these photos in a number of different ways, and only then did I create a program to surface the hidden connections between these photographs — connections like color, people, themes, time, adrenaline level, etc.

To me, this is a really interesting and quite unexplored area — using computers to process real human experience and come to a deeper understanding of it. It is like computer-assisted contemplation, or machine-based meditation. I am actually not sure if this can work, but I am interested in trying.

With computers so much is possible, so as artists we really have to ask ourselves, "WHY am I doing what I am doing? Is it just to show off? To show what a good programmer I am? To show how pretty I can make the swirly thing flying around the screen? To show how pretty I can make that generic data set look?" These are the wrong reasons for making things. Instead, we have to ask, "What does this thing give to others? How is this thing improving me as a person? How can I see something no one else can see, and how can I communicate it in a beautiful way? What kind of world do I want to see, and how can I help make it?" These are the kind of questions artists need to ask, but digital artists in particular seem to have trouble asking these questions, because they think the questions are questions for poets and philosophers, not technologists. But if more technologists thought of themselves as poets and philosophers, then very different types of software would begin to emerge, and that software would help to shape the emerging digital world, and keep it from turning into a shopping mall (if it hasn't already).

I'm very curious about *Cowbird* - which as far as I understand, also connects narrative and data-mining in new and innovative ways.

I don't want to talk too much about *Cowbird* now, except to say that it is a storytelling platform for others to use to tell stories of any size — from *The War in Iraq*, to *My Day At The Beach*. It generalizes many of the principles explored in my earlier works (maps, charts, graphs, timelines, themes, people, simple playful design, etc.), and incorporates them into a storytelling tool that non-programmers can use to tell beautiful interactive narratives. I've been working on it for almost two years, and it's nearly ready to share.

It is new for me in many ways, but mainly because it directly involves other people. All of my other works are basically portraits, in one way or another, but *Cowbird* is a tool that people use directly. There are all sorts of considerations in tool-making that you don't need to make in portraiture. I've always liked Golan Levin's maxim, "To make tools that are instantly knowable and infinitely masterable — like the pencil and the piano." I've been keeping that rule in mind designing *Cowbird*, but it is very hard!

There have been no masterpieces of digital art — or so you famously said at *Flash on the Beach* two years ago. You also said most digital work failed to move you, that much of it is unemotional. Do you still think this is true? And if so, why should this be?

As for masterpieces — I'm not sure. I guess masterpieces only fully reveal themselves with time, and that the definition of a masterpiece is precisely something that remains relevant over time. But I do still think that in general, digital art occupies an awkward adolescence, still groping around for exactly what it should be, and that the only way to grow out of this awkward adolescence is to make projects that deal with big themes, or that deal with small themes in a big way. Basically, digital artists need to make more serious work. Experimenting and tinkering are great to learn the tools, but once you learn the tools, then you have to use the tools to say something, and the saying something is much harder (but ultimately much more important). It's the only way to break through the digital ghetto and into the mainstream world.

As for digital works failing to touch me — this is something I think about a lot. I think part of the problem (and I mentioned this earlier) is how computer programming is removed from the original act of self-expression, in a way that paint and words are not. My friend Rob, who founded Etsy.com, used to ask me how I could be a digital artist, and whether I had found a way to channel my real personal experience / suffering / whatever into writing code.

I don't think I have found a way to do that. When I am really upset, or feeling other very strong emotions, it might help me to write or to draw or to paint, but the last thing I want to do is to write code, I think because writing code requires a suppression of my humanity. It's like, in order to write good code, I have to become a bad (unfeeling) person, and to become a good (feeling) person, I have to stop writing code. It is a tradeoff. And I feel this tradeoff very intensely when I go from a few weeks of traveling and writing and photographing, and then I sit down and try to write code again. I can feel the spiritual resistance, because somehow my soul knows that I am a better person when I am not writing code, and it is trying to urge me not to do it again. But as I stubbornly do it (and it usually takes a few days to get back into it) I can feel my living, breathing, human side (really, my body and senses), slowly atrophying and ultimately going away almost entirely.

Writing small computer programs is fun and easy, but writing large programs, with tens or hundreds of thousands of lines of code, is very hard. You have to keep the whole program in your mind at once, and as the program gets large, it takes up more and more of your mind, and you have no space left for anything but the program. It is like a transferral of empathy — from humans to the program. This process always makes me sad, but I do it anyway, because I like what you can make with code.

Anyway, this is something that has been on my mind a lot lately, and I'm not sure which side of it I'll end up choosing.

Programming might not be emotional in the romantic sense of the word emotion, but there are other emotional states linked to the act of programming which are just as important — I'm thinking of the intense sense of losing yourself in the task, the sense that you begin to access a purer realm of abstract thought, a state of mind which becomes a form of meditation in which time and the body begin to lose their reality.

I've heard this idea from time to time — that programming can help you reach some Zen-like state of concentration and bliss. This is probably true of any task or craft, taken intensely, and not unique to coding, though there is something Oracle-like about staring into a glowing screen. However, I'm not sure that forgetting your body is such a good thing — after all, we are human animals having a physical experience here on earth, and coding can make us forget that. Meditation can make you more present — more conscious of your body and senses — but coding takes you out of your body and senses, out of the earthly present, and into some imaginary realm. I think coding makes you less present.

Further — getting stuck with a snag in the code can be extremely emotionally debilitating and solving a problem in code can be one of the most emotionally joyful and satisfying experiences a person can have (or is that just me?)

Yes, I've experienced this "bug / solution / bug" cycle of joy and despair many times, but somehow it's always felt off to me — like it's coming from a place of insecurity and neediness, not wholeness and balance. It's kind of like being in an abusive relationship with a really hot girl who's actually a total bitch and who treats you like crap, but still you can't walk away because the highs feel so good and you like the idea of what you can build together.

So, are you saying that for you digital work can't be emotional and that by extension, a digital masterpiece is...unlikely?

No, I'm not saying that. This medium is very young, and we are still learning how to use it to craft statements and situations that could not exist in any other medium. We'll get there.