

paratext of the digital text and offers the least control to the reader. The *Page Reader*, used, for example, in *afternoon, a story*, comes with a toolbar that allows the reader to retrace her steps and to view the links pertaining to the current node. The *Storyspace Reader*, used, for example, in *I Have Said Nothing*, supplements the text window and toolbar with a map view window of the entire document, thus offering an overview of the full text and of its structure, as well as allowing the reader to access nodes without following links. All readers may contain visual representations of any level of the document structure, if the author chooses to include them manually.

■ See also **AUTHORING SYSTEMS, DIGITAL FICTION, DIGITAL HUMANITIES, ELECTRONIC LITERATURE, HYPERTEXTUALITY, INTERACTIVE FICTION, INTERACTIVE NARRATIVE, INTERFACE, LINKING STRATEGIES, NONLINEAR WRITING, SPATIALITY OF DIGITAL MEDIA**

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## Subversion (Creative Destruction)

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Our understanding of *subversion* can be traced to its Latin roots: *vertere*, which means “to turn, overthrow, or destroy,” and the prefix *sub*, which means “under, beneath.” Hence, subversion is literally destruction from below. This understanding carries with it two different connotations, one of which is more concrete, as a form of non-frontal assault on a government or similar institution, by staging the attack from behind enemy lines. The second relies on the antagonistic connotations of the first, but refers to the act of turning a system upon itself from within. This treacherous understanding of subversion has been deployed by both majority groups in a pejorative sense (who routinely consider minority groups agitating for change as “subversives,” especially when the horizon of change is imminent) and minority groups in a romantic sense (who routinely consider themselves “subversives,” especially when the horizon of change is distant).

In the most common sense, subversion deals with questions of content or form. Subversive content consists of those discursive disruptions in which the prevailing notion is overturned by a countervailing notion presented from within. For instance, a television show might present a taboo subject in a sympathetic way, thus breaking the silence and demystifying the aura of shame associated with the taboo subject. In the case of the mashup, juxtapositions of information presented seamlessly through a single interface can disrupt the steady narrative of a particular media object, thus subverting the intended continuity of the original media objects (see **MASHUP**).

It is the treacherous understanding of subversion that is most commonly employed when discussing the subversive potential of digital media, as the terrain of media presupposes communication and depends to a large degree on systems of code (see **CODE**).

Within the context of human language, systems of representation, though flexible and indeterminate, require commonly held denotative meanings and grammatical conventions as a prerequisite for intelligibility. Thus, semiosis tends toward normativity and the relative stability of hegemony, even if the signs themselves always contain connotations in excess of their discrete value. Machine languages, on the other hand, are logical, rigidly symbolic as opposed to semiotic, and achieve expression in their application. Where humans and machines interact (at the level of programming, at the level of use, or, increasingly, at the level of subroutine), the mediation between human language and machine language is achieved through algorithms (see *ALGORITHM*, *INTERFACE*). Thus, increasingly, human experience is becoming machine-readable, and the landscape of this codification provides a large and growing target for subversion (see Cayley 2011). Ironically, however, as this target expands, its vocabulary and inertia also grow, decreasing the likelihood that subversion can achieve its desired goal of revolution.

As a consequence, contemporary subversion in postindustrial society often eschews overtly confrontational means (though these also apply in the case of distributed denial-of-service [DDOS] attacks, malicious hacking, etc.), preferring to operate by way of creative and aesthetic actions that “capture” the imagination (see Holmes 2009; Raley 2009). Consonant with the avant-garde impulse in the arts, it follows that the romantically treacherous understanding of the term would be the dominant understanding of subversion within the digital media arts. However, the spirit of the digital revolution, especially the iconoclasm associated with the “Californian Ideology” (see Barbrook and Cameron 1995), creates additional affinities between the romantically treacherous notion of subversion and the social status of the programmer. Nowhere is this subversive social role more clearly expressed than in the image of the hacker (see *HACKER*). And, in fact, the digital revolution has produced significant, often-unexpected changes in human thought and behavior. Furthermore, changes to the trajectory of digital media itself have been produced through the process of invention and innovation.

In the case of works that engage in formal subversion, the established codes of representation or systems of discourse are unsettled by strategic ambiguities and inconsistencies in the internal logic of the system. For instance, a prevailing style of representation might be disturbed by a counterintuitive representation that calls into question the presumed informational value of the prevailing style. In the case of media hoaxes, stylistic conventions create the impression of informational value, causing people to believe things that aren’t true because they accept the form (see *HOAXES*). Viral videos, on the other hand, exploit emotional or intellectual desires and vulnerabilities in human users to replicate and spread the media object across a vast network, via all available means of human communication (see *VIRAL AESTHETICS*).

Though Marxist critical theory has historically viewed the cycles of order and chaos both as symptoms of capitalism and as the dialectical engine of human progress toward socialism, the postmodern perspective abandons the inevitability of socialism, seeing turbulence as a consistent state of affairs within late capitalism (see Jameson 1991; Harvey 1989). And, in fact, as early as the 1940s, economist Joseph Schumpeter ([1942] 1994) identified “creative destruction” within capitalist economies as a permanent state of subversion driving wave after wave of technical innovation. Michel Foucault’s (1988) analysis of discourse and governmentality also concluded that the existence of norms and their transgression were the means through which power is reproduced. Thus, any discussion of subversion after postmodernism must go beyond the basic definition and take into

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account the larger cultural, economic, and technical norms being subverted, including our understanding of subversion itself.

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From the cultural studies perspective, targets of subversion are the hegemonic structures of thought and practice which regulate, define, and normalize institutional power. Implicit in this definition is a defining power differential: subversion can only be accomplished relative to a plane of consistency. Also implicit in the definition is a strong affinity for the cybernetic (see *CYBERNETICS*), as the means of subversion must be present within the larger field of knowledge, and the “turning” is accomplished through a form of feedback into the system. To be considered subversive in this sense, digital media must forge a link between broader hegemonic processes and the specific qualities of the medium in question. For instance, it is possible to convey subversive political content via digital channels (blogs, e-mail, websites), and it is possible to engage in reflexive poetic practices via digital media without engaging in larger political questions (creating a new interface, writing a new program, adapting an application to an off-label use), but only when we encounter a productive friction between the technics of the digital and the broader political context of such technical systems do we have “digital media subversion.” Historically, avant-garde practices in the arts have engaged in such interventions, striking strategically at internal vulnerabilities within formal and semiotic systems to disrupt the process by which such systems operate (see Renee Magritte’s *La trahison des images* [1928–1929]), while unsettling epistemic assumptions.

Within the context of digital media, some areas of critical intervention have included (but are not limited to) the military/industrial foundations of computing, networked subjectivity, machine intelligence, the aura of print media, consumerism and the web, information overload, Internet hype, corporate and state censorship, and, increasingly, the specter of data mining and surveillance. In place of mere condemnation of these aspects of contemporary life, the subversive work of digital media must accomplish a response that provokes a subjectively held critical response to the phenomenon in question.

More fundamental, perhaps, is the question of subversion as it relates to the norms of digitality itself: the subversion of the “discrete” value as applied to the entirety of existence. The process of digitization, which reassembles the organic as transmissible, programmable units of abstract value, increasingly permeates all levels of social existence. From digital communication to human labor, from intelligence to food, reality is increasingly being rendered in commodity form, subject to information processing, communication, and storage. This process of creative destruction is where subversion is headed in the twenty-first century, because it is increasingly recognizable as the emergent *logos* (see [www.thechurchofgoogle.org/](http://www.thechurchofgoogle.org/)). This emerging universal structure, then, is the definitive terrain upon which all future acts of digital subversion will be formed.

■ See also *GLITCH AESTHETICS*

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