

REPLICATE

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Digital replication is a trivial process: no sweat-hot crucible, no cellular negotiations. Just copy: read and write, transcribe. Sex as a clerical procedure. But fast. What it delivers is more of the same: *much* more, which of course means it's never the same again.

The champion digital replicators, viruses and worms, show how more of the same breeds not uniformity or stasis, but anxious entropic chaos: the clumsy dance of a cybercultural immune system trying to invent itself (download patches). The replicated mass unsettles its host, provokes new responses. Replicators scale unpredictably, revealing thresholds and limits within their hosts.

Artists' replicators, by comparison, are feeble things, unable to reproduce in the wild. They are fish-tank creatures, designed for display, and therefore bounded. Hard to admire your pets if they've slipped down the sewer (modem) to play in the sea. Tom Ray, creating his Tierra a-life environment, reportedly smashed the computer's network ports with a hammer. Just to be sure.

New media art's best wild replicators are marketing messages and art/work/brands, spewed from the gullets of cybercultural megafauna (lists, institutions, organisations) and passed on by individuals. But these too are delicate creatures, overreliant on scarce host attention, too susceptible to filtering. How long until clever art-spam, with randomised text implants?

So now to the art of real, wild digital replicators. Agents that subsist and persist in the network, but more sophisticated than recent worms/works. Those we know about are either malicious puppets for the same old crime, or bragware, digital tagging, the same old territoriality (imagine the joy of the dog, to be able to piss on a *million* trees). An artist should be more subtle, and ecologically savvy. Symbiosis; co-evolution; symbiogenesis. Killing your host, or annoying it enough to want to wipe you out, is almost never a sound evolutionary strategy. These replicators would also use scale effects to perturb the host system, but the results may be more difficult to discern, and they would exploit the host culture's own dynamics. A leaked email here, a PXT broadcast there. Let the immune system do the rest. And/or, they would be resource appropriators, skimming processing power for some fiendishly complex bit of video or sound processing. The world is your render farm.

All of which demands an ethical debate, to be sustainable, and not just some cyberlibertarian "law of the jungle." Still, as terrestrial ecology has shown us, it takes all sorts. So I am at least partly serious when I say, bring on the art worms.

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