

Preface: Programming the Bleeding Edge of Obsolescence

This book was inspired by the many lives of new media—by the ways that it not only survives, but also thrives on, cycles of obsolescence and renewal.

In the early 2000s, new media seemed to be dead, and the utopian and dystopian discourses around the World Wide Web and Y2K were exposed for what they were: hype. Gone were the celebrations of the “new economy,” virtual reality, and cyberspace. The term *new media* even seemed “old”: the New York New Media Association folded in 2003, and many New Media Groups within corporate structures (Apple, Gannett, etc.), and many new media companies disappeared.¹ Everyone was on the Internet—new media was everywhere—but new media seemed boring; the reality of surfing the net did not compare to the glitzy cyberpunk visions touted by *Mondo 2000*.

By 2008, however, the future was, once more, in fashion, and there was a growing impatience with the so-called critical hindsight that flourished after the dot.bombs and 9/11. Rather than sobering if banal reassessments of the Internet as a “double-edged sword” that aids both terrorists and victims, the main strain of both popular and scholarly new media analysis stressed future possibilities and sought to outline the next big thing: mobile mobs, Web 3.0, cloud computing, radical topsight, and so on. A sense that something had really changed, as well as a desire to capitalize on this change, fueled this renewal: the returns of new media are linked to the promise of financial returns. Silicon Valley, if not Alley, had recovered from the demise of the “new economy”; Google was everywhere in every possible form; iPhones and BlackBerries had proliferated; even Granny was on Facebook.com. Every social movement, every social protest appeared to be wired; newspaper companies were folding and television stations laid off staff as content migrated online; everyone, it appeared, was bombarding one another with 140-character-long tweets, and no one seemed to care.

This future 2.0, like Web 2.0 or 3.0, was not as utopian or as bold as its mid-1990s predecessor, *the* future. No one was prophesying the end of all brick-and-mortar businesses; there were no upbeat yet paranoid commercials promising the end to racial discrimination and the beginnings of a happy global village; there were no must-read cyberpunk novels or films outlining cyberspace’s gritty, all-encompassing nature,

although *new media* does now encompass the bio- and nanotech. Instead, even within this optimism, there was a dim yet gnawing sense that this too will pass, that every next big thing is also the next big bubble (if it's anything at all). To call something new, after all, is to guarantee its obsolescence, and this hopeful return to the future as future simple—as what will be, as what you will do, as a programmed upgrade to your already existing platform—constantly recedes and disappears. Although this cycle of the ever-returning and ever-receding new mirrors the economic cycle it facilitates, the undeadness of new media is not a simple consequence of economics; rather, this book argues, this cycle is also related to new media's (undead) logic of programmability. New media proliferates “programmed visions,” which seek to shape and to predict—indeed to embody—a future based on past data.

This book addresses this concept of programmability through the surprising materialization of software as a *thing* in its own right. It argues that the hardening of programming into software and of memory into storage is key to understanding new media as a constantly inspiring yet disappointing medium of the future. It links this hardening to several factors: computing's gendered and military history, foundational parallels between the fields of genetics and computing technology, long-standing visions of a stable archive of knowledge as driving human progress, and a general, neoliberal trend to personalize power (to make power touch each and all). All this has made the computer, understood as networked software and hardware machines, both an instrument and a symptom of neoliberal governmental power. It has made it an instrument of both causal pleasure and extreme frustration, a means of navigation and obfuscation.

This book, however, does not seek to condemn computers as simple neoliberal tools or to view user empowerment as a form of imprisonment. Computers are mediums of power in the fullest senses of both words. Through them, we can pleurably create visions that go elsewhere, specters that reveal the limitations and possibilities of user and programmer, choices that show how we can rework neoliberal formulations of freedom and flexibility. Specters haunt us through our interfaces—by working with them we can collectively negotiate the dangers and pleasures of the worlds they encapsulate and explode.

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to all those who have read and sponsored various parts of this book. I owe special thanks to Matthew Fuller and Florian Cramer who read drafts of the whole book, and to Lisa Gannett, N. Katherine Hayles, Adrian Mackenzie, the editors of *Grey Room*, the editorial board of *Critical Inquiry*, and the Critical Code Studies Working Group, who all read and offered critiques of portions of it. Their comments have immeasurably improved this book. I have learned much and received great

support from my colleagues in the Department of Modern Culture and Media. To Chris Csikszentmihalyi, Arindam Dutta, Liz Canner, Lynn Festa, Thomas Keenan, and Mary Ann Doane, I owe much inspiration and good cheer. I am also grateful to my incredible research assistant Ioana Jucan for her impeccable work and to Robin Davis for her assistance with the images. To the fantastic editorial machine at MIT—Doug Sery, Katie Helke, and Kathleen Caruso—I owe an enormous thanks. Without the love and support of my sweetie Paul Moorcroft, this book would not have been possible.

Research for this book was supported by grants, fellowships and leave from Brown University (in particular, a Henry Merritt Wriston Fellowship and a Edwin and Shirley Seave Faculty Fellowship from the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women)—I am grateful to Brown University for its financial and academic support. A fellowship from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study was crucial to conceiving the manuscript, and a travel award from the Lemelson Center at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institute made it possible for me to do archival work. I began writing in earnest while a visiting scholar in Harvard University's History of Science Department—I would like to thank Harvard and my hosts for their invaluable support.

Fragments of the book have been published in *Configurations*, *Grey Room*, and *Critical Inquiry*.

Boston, Massachusetts
August 2010

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/9780262015424.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262015424.001.0001)

Programmed Visions

Software and Memory

By: Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

Citation:

Programmed Visions: Software and Memory

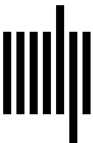
By: Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/9780262015424.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262295215

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2013



The MIT Press

© 2011 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information about special quantity discounts, please email special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu

This book was set in Stone Sans and Stone Serif by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong, 1969–

Programmed visions : software and memory / Wendy Hui Kyong Chun.

p. cm. — (Software studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01542-4 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Computer software—Development—Social aspects. 2. Software architecture—Social aspects. 3. Computer software—Human factors. I. Title.

QA76.76.D47C565 2011

005.1—dc22

2010036044

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1