Super-Natural: Digital Life in Eastern Culture

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Abstract

The ways in which digital technologies find themselves integrated into society are influenced to a significant degree by cultural conventions. In Western culture there is a tendency to consider digital technology in terms of hardware and software that is introduced into various processes to enable us to work more efficiently and better negotiate our domestic and networked social lives. Such conventions render digital technologies transparent and invisible and in doing so defers our realization that technology is always with us; everywhere and in everything. This culturally reinforced attitude obscures our perceptual experience of “technology-being-with-us”. In response, this paper examines our relationship with technology through exploring alternative, non-Western conceptions of interdependence. In support of this study we examine a series of cultural activities practiced in Korea in order to appreciate how the hardware and software associated with digital technologies can be perceived as non-human entities. This discussion will extend onto an analysis of selected artworks by Nam June Paik, before turning attention to the Japanese media art movement Device Art. The characteristics of this genre – noted for its particular relation to Japanese cultural influences – will be examined to reveal how everyday technologies are used to create interactive experiences that promote a sense of “technology-being-with-us”.

Keywords: art, new media, digital technology, culture

1 Introduction

Digital technologies are now a pervasive part of contemporary life. From moment to moment, we oscillate between physical and digital worlds, moving back and forth across a blurred boundary between these two realms. While everyday events ground us in the world, our engagements and interactions with these events are significantly transformed by digital technologies such as electronic sensors, computer vision and radio frequency identification (RFID) technology. The nature of our relationship with these technologies is complex; we create them and they, in turn, shape us.

The proliferation of technological intervention and mediation in contemporary life induces us to accept certain “patterns” of interaction. These routines or habits are embedded seamlessly into the constituent parts of our physical environment. Computer hardware and digital systems are concealed in a diverse array of everyday objects such as in cars, domestic appliances (e.g., iRobot Roomba), and as “smart” devices.

In this newly transformed cultural landscape, digital technologies tend to be regarded as tools designed for efficiency [Paul 2008]. This tendency to think of digital devices, or gadgets, that assist humans to manage our lives influences the way in which digital technologies are deployed not just everyday and everywhere but also “in everything” [Greenfield 2006]. This pragmatic perspective on technology affects the way technologies are implemented in the workplace and domestic environments [Dunn 2008]. The direction of design in the field of human computer interaction (HCI) is also influenced by this ideology [Bolter and Gromala 2003]. For example, in Invisible Computer, cognitive scientist Donald A. Norman [1998] argues vehemently that technology should be invisible, hidden from sight, so that users can pay more attention to their tasks, advocating for what he terms “user-centred” technology. Left untested, the narratives that privilege these particular discursive orientations underwrite how we understand the cultural influence of digital production in the “West”.

In Hertzian Tales, designer Anthony J. Dunne [2008] writes that electronic technology is informed by an uncritical acceptance of what historian Bernard Waites calls “American Ideology” or “ideological legitimation of technology”. All problems whether of nature, human nature, or culture, are viewed as “technical” problems that demand rationalized solutions – by relying upon objective knowledge (in the form of neutral or value-free observations and correlations) applied through procedures whose ends are ultimately linked with the maximization of society’s productivity. It is predominantly through the “instrumental rationality” [Dunn 2008; Waites 1989] of Euro-American centric epistemologies that digital media systems and new media art are refracted. Whilst there are a number of apparent exceptions to this rule – notably Yvonne Spielmann’s exploration of Japanese new-media art scene in Hybrid Culture [2012] – these exceptions are also primarily channeled through a Western apprehension of life and hybridized for a particular audience.1 Similarly, Inazo Nitobe [1900] in his seminal meditation on Japanese culture Bushido: The Soul of Japan claims that many European and American accounts of Japanese culture have been largely misplaced, as the nuances that underpin the relationships

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1 This is a point also made by Spielmann who observes that the vast array of monographs, collections and journals on media-culture in Japan, and indeed on media culture in “Asia Pacific” is predominately filtered through Western perspectives which show a complete lack of ethnographic or cultural positioning [2012, 11-13].
between ritual, technology and culture were lost in translation, resulting in a hybrid understanding of many cultural features of the nation.

The authors of this paper argue that there are alternative cultural strategies—which might be framed as “Eastern” — through which to apprehend the interrelationships between humans and mediated systems. Technologies — including digital media — are not simply introduced into society as tools or artefacts for us to deploy in the “real world”, “out there”. Technology is (always) in us and has an essential, interdependent relationship with us. We consider the fundamental characteristic of the relationship between humans and technology as “technology-being-with-us”. In an examination of technology and culture, the historian Mazlish [1967] observes that human evolution was made possible through the continuous engagement with the tools that were – and are – filtered through our emotional and cognitive state. For the anthropologist Washburn [1960] tools changed the pressures of natural selection in humans and so changed the structure of our way of life. While tools and technologies have been the result of human imagination and ingenuity, it is through their use that we have come to continuously reconstruct ourselves, our social milieu and the wider world in which we live.

2 Cultural Tradition as a lens to understand human-technological interdependence

Interdependence implies that both humans and technology are cooperative partners, and that their relationship is reciprocal. In this respect, human–technological interdependency is analogous to the manner in which Eastern philosophies such as Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism seek to harmonize an organic relationship between people, nature and the constructed environment (technical). An Eastern understanding of human–technological interdependency is realized overtly and foregrounded in everyday cultural activities, even those considered mundane. Such differences warrant further examination, especially from an Eastern philosophical approach. (N. Given that one of the authors of this paper, Hwang, is strongly informed by his Korean heritage, we specifically cast this examination through a range of cultural activities practiced in Korea.)

It is common practice in traditional Korean culture to foreground the interdependency between humans and non-humans in all forms of daily activities and routines through exaggerated expressions designed to signify that we live with “others”. These non-humans or others include nature, animals, technology, as well as immaterial entities such as spiritual beings. Another common characteristic specific to Korean cultural practices foregrounds various forms of otherwise mundane activities. This occurs as part of the Korean culture’s creative strategy to refocus attention on the materiality and immateriality of otherness, including digital technologies and systems, to evoke the sense of technology-being-with-us. Foregrounding the mundane is not specific to Korea as it also occurs in other Eastern countries. For example Deleuze and Parnet [2007] remind us that the “arts of Zen, archery, gardening or taking tea, are exercises to make the event surge forth and dazzle on a pure surface”. They go on to observe that these activities are designed—even staged—for us to focus on the very mundane action that we perform. In doing so, our actions offer us opportunities to contemplate the entangled connections in activities such as the rituals and relationships that exist between nature, and the non-living—often technical entities such as the bow and arrow, the tree, flower or tea.

2.1 Korean Cultural Tradition

The relationship between human and non-human entities in Korean culture is underpinned by concepts of interdependence and communality, that is, “living together”. The legacy of the Choson dynasty (1392–1910) underwrites a diverse range of traditions in Korea. This cultural legacy dominates the manner in which contemporary Koreans live and informs a wide range of social standards and norms including language (Hangul). These cultural traditions are directly descended from Neo-Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and shamanism [Wells 2000]. At the heart of the shared cultural “aesthetic” of these traditions are the philosophical concepts of Yin and Yang, and the “five elements” derived from Chinese cosmology. Yin and Yang are the two complementary yet opposing forces of nature from which it was believed the universe was formed. According to East Asian cosmology, the union of Yin and Yang resulted in the creation of the five elements: earth, fire, wood, metal and water. An important aspect of East Asian cosmology is the understanding that the world is contingent on the intertwined connections of all elements—philosophical (Yin and Yang) and natural (five elements)—which when combined with human ingenuity, creativity and spirit form the foundations of society. For Roberts and Brand these “five elements are the natural materials first used by all human beings to fashion objects of utility and aesthetic presence” [Roberts and Brand 2001].

This cosmology informs the concept of communality in Korean culture, which is “to seek solutions to ubiquitous human problems by transcending individuality through identification with a larger community” [Baker 2008]. This communality is not confined to interpersonal relationships; it filters throughout society, permeating all facets of the Korean understanding of the relationship between human beings, nature and spiritual beings. For example, Baker [2008] observes that Koreans believe that it is the “pursuit of individual interest at the expense of the larger community that introduces evils into this world. Therefore, forming a personal alliance with a powerful spirit or punishing our bodies are not good ways to fight evil. Instead, we should remind ourselves that we do not exist in isolation from the people and things around us” [Baker 2008]. Certain features of communality might be considered as basically universal features found in most societies; however, as a collection of traditions, including the specific ritual practices through activities such as culinary art, commemorative rites, and folk paintings, these practices reveal a particularly Korean understanding of our interdependent relationships with non-living entities and communality. The following three practices that inform various facets of Korean life will provide the reader with greater insight into this cultural sensibility whilst simultaneously provide the reader with a deeper appreciation of technology in Korean culture through the work of Nam Jun Paik, discussed below.

2.1a Culinary Art: Bibimbap

The preparation and eating of various types of food are very important cultural practices in Eastern cultures. Different countries and regions have unique culinary “signatures” that have come to be culturally identifiable such as sushi in Japan. In the case of Korea, Bibimbap (비빔밥) is a signature recipe that is infused with the ideology of the world (Yin and Yang and the five elements). Bibimbap is an excellent cultural artefact through which to examine the interdependent relationship between Yin,Yang, and the five elements. The word “Bibimbap” (비빔밥) literally means “to mix”, an important point that will be explored further below. Bibimbap is represented as a symbol of the wisdom
of the Korean ancestors in pursuit of harmony in nature and social behaviors. Bibimbap is a large bowl of rice topped with various vegetables such as bean sprouts, zucchini, squash, thin strips of beef, a fried egg and paprika paste. In its preparation, each topping ingredient is cooked according to its “nature” to sustain its distinctive taste. The overall combination of the various ingredients is selected based on the harmony that embodies the Korean belief that each food ingredient contains the characteristic Yin-Yang, and the five elements. Once prepared, the toppings are mixed together with rice and eaten with a spoon. When all the ingredients are mixed, Bibimbap delivers a new flavour; however, it does not do so at the expense of the individual distinctive flavours because the taste of each ingredient is sustained. The art of making Bibimbap is to produce a flavour that both closely maintains the flavour of the unique elements but also connects the other elements to simultaneously produce a new flavor (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:

2.1b Commemorative Rites: Jeasa

Commemorative rituals in Korea are ancestor-worship ceremonies held at different intervals. In the common annual ancestral rite, Jeasa (제사), a single ceremonial meal is prepared in the belief that the ancestral spirits visit the human beings on Earth to eat the food. This event both evokes the relationship to the ancestors and reinforces the fellowship Koreans have.

The food arrangement in Jeasa accords with the philosophy of Yin-Yang and the five elements. The color and shape of the ingredients that comprise the meal match the five elements—green, red, yellow, white and black, and their placement on the table follows the positive-negative balance of Yin-Yang. The most important aspect of this rite is that the physical form is designed to remind participants that there is something beyond the physical world—life and death, material and immaterial, body and spirit. Koreans believe that there are spiritual beings beyond the physical world that influence our present condition. It is believed that when the living take good care of the dead, the spirits will provide for the living if they (the living) encounter hardship or face significant problems in their mortal lives (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:

2.1c Folk Paintings: Minhwa

Minhwa(민화) is a specific type of folk painting created by laypeople rather than professional artists (see figure 3). This form of painting was developed in the seventeenth century to reflect on the life of ordinary people and their relationships in the world with other people, animals, everyday objects and the natural landscape. The main use of Minhwa is decorative, and is applied to the adornment of objects such as hand-held folding fans, Byung Pyung (a movable folding wall or screen), and spaces such as a door to a room. Minhwa is considered to have a magical dimension. Through Minhwa, Koreans possess beneficial virtues such as protecting the owner of a house and their family from an evil force or to help overcome the fear of menacing beings such as a tiger. Minhwa reminds Koreans that human beings live with other material and immaterial beings, including spiritual beings (good or bad). Koreans use Minhwa as a means to express the beliefs and desires of the virtue of spiritual beings or non-human entities. Without this strong belief in both the existence of spiritual beings and Koreans people’s interdependent relationship with them and other non-human entities, Minhwa becomes a mere visual description of the natural world (albeit stylized).

Figure 3:

The examples of Bibimbap, Jeasa and Minhwa provide insight into an Eastern understanding (expressed in the Korean tradition) of the cultural practices that serve to mediate between humans and “other” entities, creating a greater sense of communality. It can be observed that a number of Eastern artists have explored such themes in relation to media art, most notable among these is Nam June Paik and a number of artworks in the Device Art movement from Japan.

3 Nam June Paik

The works of Nam June Paik exemplify how the themes considered in this paper can be rearticulated into media art practice. For Paik, technology is an essential part of our life and its influence on our life is inevitable. Instead of casting negative views on this inevitability, he placed a positive perspective on this influence and sought to express possible harmonious relationships between humans and technology through his artworks. Paik’s positive view of technology is clearly articulated in the following statement:

It’s all your life in one. Our life is half natural and half technological. Half-and-half is good. You cannot deny that high-tech is progress. We need it for jobs. Yet if you make only high-tech, you make war. So we must have a strong human element to keep modesty and natural life—[Nam June Paik in McGill 1986]

The unique way in which Paik’s work reflected on technology articulates a human–technological “assemblage” [Deleuze and Guattari 1987]. By imporing viewers to consider what technology means to our human nature, he emphasized the role of technology as a mediator [Kim 2010]. Paik’s articulation of the human–technological assemblage was influenced by his Korean cultural background, in particular it was informed by Bibim culture (discussed above). According to Paik’s wife, Shigeko Kubota, Paik loved traditional Korean food and used to observe that his artworks were similar to Korean Bibimbap [Koh 2012]. Lee [2002] observes that Paik’s approach to video art shared features with this traditional Korean dish by representing the qualities of a “mixed up, convergence and hybridity”. For Paik, Bibimbap was a twofold concept. First, it informed his stylistic strategy, and second, it offered an aesthetic language through which he could express his perception of technology, the electronic medium in particular. The uniqueness of Paik’s oeuvre is derived from this concept, embodying the manner in which the characteristics of each element could be sustained while simultaneously mixing together each element to create a new form. In works such as TV Rodin (1982) and Exposition of Music – Electronic Television (1963), Paik mixed familiar yet unrelated components (e.g. television sets, sculptural forms—such as statue of the Buddha and an imitation of Rodin’s The Thinker—and musical instruments such as the cello and piano) into new combinations that reflect on the relationship between humans and technology. For Paik the humanization of technology was a major theme informing his practice:

The real implied issue in “art and technology” is not to make another scientific toy, but how to humanize the
technology and the electronic medium, which is progressing rapidly—too rapidly. Progress has already outstripped ability to program ... TV Brassiere for Living Sculpture (Charlotte Moorman) is also one sharp example to humanize electronics ... and technology. By using TV as bra ... the most intimate belonging of human being, we will demonstrate the human use of technology, and also stimulate viewers NOT for something mean but stimulate their fantasy to look for the new, imaginative and humanistic ways of using our technology. [Paik 1969]

4 Device Art

Nam June Paik's distinctive manner of creating technological assemblages has influenced the practice of many new media artists, including the movement known as Device Art that originated in Japan’s contemporary media art scene in the late 1990s. According to media art curator and researcher Machiko Kusahara, Device Artists can be characterized by their shared interest in integrating the newest commercially available technologies into their art-making process [Kusahara 2009b]. Similar to Paik's interest in the (then) newly available commercial format of video in the early 1970s, Device Artists integrate the latest consumer technologies. For example, artists Nobumichi Tosa and Ryota Kuwakubo rearticulate familiar technological objects to create an aesthetic medium through which to reconsider our relationship with new technology. In doing so these artists seek to question and examine the relationships between art, science, and technology from both a contemporary and historical perspective [Kusahara 2008]. The aim of such an examination is to enable viewers and participants to enjoy and understand "what media technologies mean to us" [Kusahara 2009b] today, while also exhibiting qualities that draw upon time-honoured cultural traditions founded upon the interdependency between human beings and non-living entities.2

4.1 Characteristics of Device Art

Generally speaking, a device is an instrument that serves to accomplish a certain task or result. In art, the consideration of a device's role is typically confined to an artwork's production. For instance, the viewer may not always consider the brushes that were used to apply media to a painting as having much to do with the content of the work itself, even though these brushes were essential to the creation of the work. This is because the paintbrush is simply considered as a "tool" involved in the execution of the artwork. However, Kusahara [2006] argues that "this role of a device as mere instrument no longer remains as true in some cases of art forms, such as interactive installations". In interactive installations, the artist’s chosen technologies have a significant impact on the installation’s theme, concept, and experience. Instead of serving as a means of producing representation, the focus of Device Art is on the creative re-configuration of hardware that emphasizes the physical form of technologies. Accordingly, Kusahara states that:

Works of Device Art involve hardware specially designed to realize a particular concept. The functional and visual design of such hardware, or device, is an essential part of the artwork. Material and technology are explored and used in an original and innovative manner. The material chosen is important for users to keep in touch with the real world. Sometimes participant-users are invited to discover an unexpected nature of particular material, which has become visible through the artist’s idea with the help of [digital] technology. [Kusahara 2007]

In other words, the device itself is the content. As Kusahara observes, in Device Art: technology is not hidden, its function is visible and easy to understand, while it still brings about a sense of wonder [Kusahara 2006]. Elaborating on this point further, art historian and media scholar Barbara Maria Stafford describes how devices can provoke wonder. For Stafford, “wondrous” devices represent a wide range of human-made objects that generate a sense of amazement, such as telescopes and microscopes, and even cabinets for the display of natural objects such as butterfly collections [Stafford 2001]. Stafford’s notion of wonder applies to Device Artists, for whom the physical form of an artwork can and often does manifest the “wonder” of media technologies.

Hiroo Iwata’s project Robot Tiles (2009) illustrates the hardware-orientated characteristic of Device Art. Robot Tiles consists of four robots designed to look like floor tiles. Each robot is covered with an electrically conductive textile that senses a user’s physical interaction—users can stand on or walk across the tiles. Ceiling-mounted infrared sensors are used to track the user’s location to determine the direction that the user is facing. This sensor-enabled perception of position and direction of movement allows the robotic floor tiles to move and re-position themselves in relation to the user, according to a computationally predicted movement pattern. The robots thus provide users with potential places to move. The tiles are both the devices and content of Iwata’s artwork.

The idea of “device-as-content” that underwrites the field of Device Art, has a “prehistory”, according to media archaeologist and curator Erkki Huhtamo [2009]. Huhtamo observes that this kind of art practice developed out of the drastic changes in the concept of art itself during the 20th Century. Huhtamo notes that the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century established new ways to understand art by questioning the traditional concept of art [2009]. According to Huhtamo, a new kind of human-machine relationship was developed, which manifested itself on three levels:

First, artists began considering the machine worth representing as an emblem of contemporary technological society... Second, avant-gardists like Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, the leader of the Futurists, claimed that machines should be used [original emphasis] to make art. The third and the most radical position was that machines themselves could become works of art. [Huhtamo 2009]

In light of Huhtamo’s proposition, we contend that Nam Jun Paik’s media artworks are proponents of the concept of “device-as-content”. For example, in Participation TV (1963-6) and Random Access (1963), Paik re-configured two devices—a television and a tape participant respectively—to provide viewers with experiences that encouraged reflection on the potential effects of technology. In Participation TV Paik connected a microphone to a television through a foot-operated switch. By speaking into the microphone, viewers could witness the transformation of their own voice into image, as their voice became a complex visual pattern generated in real-time on the TV’s screen [Dumett 2011]. In Random Access Paik attached more than fifty strips of audiotape to a wall. A playback head taken out of a reel-to-reel tape deck was wired to a pair of speakers, and viewers were encouraged to play the segments by

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2 According to Kusahara [2009b] and media artist Hiroo Iwata [Iwata 2005], Device Art’s three main characteristics can be summarized as: content; playful and steeped in Japanese tradition.
While not involving direct user interaction, Paik’s *TV Buddha* (1974) and *TV Cello* (1971), invite viewers to reflect on their relationship with technology through their unexpected reconfiguration of a familiar device. Paik’s approach to manipulating devices—making the familiar, unfamiliar—is suggestive of the sense of play and entertainment that is often expressed in Device Art. Kusahara argues that playfulness makes it possible for “the artworks [to] reach a broad audience by being mass-produced and commercially distributed” [Kusahara 2009b]. Artist Toshio Iwai’s electronic musical instrument *Tenori-On* (2005), created in collaboration with and commercially distributed by Yamaha, is not confined to galleries, museums, or the artist’s own performances. It is also a consumer product. *Tenori-On* consists of a sixteen by sixteen grid of LED switches. The instrument enables users to instantly create sound and images without a difficult learning curve; the user can play music with *Tenori-On* by activating the LEDs. The see-through device ensures both user and any potential audience can see the light patterns produced by the LEDs. Kusahara [2007] writes that the critical aspect of *Tenori-On* is that it allows users to discover a “new mode of creativity”, “unexpected channels of communication”, and “an alternative viewpoint in understanding media”.

Certain qualities of Device Art can also be shown to have their basis in the Japanese tradition of appreciating tools and materials. Historically, tools in Japan were not considered as merely the means to an end. The process and the manner of using a tool was as important as the result itself [Kusahara 2007]. This characteristic is illustrated in the tradition of the tea ceremony. To attend a tea ceremony in Japan is to experience the act of drinking a cup of green tea as a performative process—from the atmosphere of the setting to the quality of the tea itself. In the tea ceremony, a playful attitude is regarded favorably, and the tools used, such as the tea set and the furniture, are appreciated not only for their function but also for their design and materiality. In addition, the tools reflect the taste and personality of the host [Kusahara 2007]. This tradition of appreciating tools continues today in the commodities and gadgets common to contemporary Japanese society. For example, this overt appreciation for commodities and gadgets is explicitly expressed in the decorative straps created by Takashi Murakami that adorn mobile phones and in USB memory sticks which look like sushi.

Device Art gives aesthetic form to technology as a convergence of tool, medium, and theme in the art-making process. In Sachiko Kodama and Minako Takeno’s *Protrude, Flow* (2001), the artists use magnetic fluid, responsive sound, and projected video in an interactive installation. Three-dimensional patterns of magnetic fluid are formed and transformed in real-time, based on the ambient sounds—primarily the voices of the viewers—present in the exhibition space. The flowing movement and dynamic transformations of the fluid are simultaneously captured as video, and projected onto a wide screen displayed within the exhibition space. In this project, the artists explore an alternative use of magnetic technology in an original and innovative manner:

The responsive behavior of a magnetic fluid to an applied magnetic field, producing interesting shapes with many protrusions, is widely known, however there have been few studies that apply magnetic fluid as a display…. [We] developed a novel display using magnetic fluid based on a rather simple mechanism. We expect that this will serve as an entertaining visual display in the future. We hope to re-examine the display design, and explore other methods of sound interaction [Kodama and Takeno 2001].

*Protrude, Flow* serves as a demonstration of artistic intent in the repurposing of technology. The functional and visual design of the installation’s hardware is essential to the artwork. The device itself reveals a potential possibility of magnetic technology, while the magnetic fluid is suggestive of a communication medium.

Nobumichi Tosa’s *Seamoons* (2004) is a computer controlled musical instrument. The instrument’s continually pumping bellows blows air into an artificial vocal chord made of rubber, the tension of which is computer controlled. The physical mechanism generates sounds from this input. This process of creating the analog sound from the digital input is clearly visible to viewers. As Tosa performs with the instrument he explains to the audience how the system works. For Tosa, the visibility and transparency of the device’s technology is an important characteristic of the artwork.

The technology used in *Protrude, Flow* and *Seamoons* is not regarded as something to be hidden behind an artistic concept, rather it is brought to the fore in each work, making the technological potentiality visible to the audience and participants [Kusahara 2006].

### 4.3 Interactive Experience in Device Art

As stated above, artists working within the field of Device Art tend to make the interactive experience of an artwork playful and entertaining. For Kusahara, this approach is “often misunderstood as an equivalent to lack (sic) of seriousness or criticism, especially from the Western art history point of view, which has a strong tradition in appreciating “serious” art.” [Kusahara 2009a], because while such playfulness can be understood as being deeply embedded in Japanese culture, the artwork’s critical stance does not necessitate being serious towards technology [Kusahara 2009b].

In Japan playfulness is often accompanied by another idiom of Japanese culture called *Mitate* which is “a method to present and read hidden meanings behind what is shown or written” [Kusahara 2009b]. In *Mitate* metaphors, associations and double
meanings are used in a playful manner. According to Kusahara, Mitate allows: an artist to set a multitude of layers in his/her work, the top layer may be playful and entertaining, but a serious theme may be read behind the playfulness. Mitate itself is an intellectual play between the artist, the artwork, and the viewers. Like unexpected objects used in tea ceremony, Mitate provides fun of discoveries and imagination to participants. [Kusahara 2009a]

With the concept of Mitate in mind, the interactive experience normally associated with Device Art can be viewed as an exploration of meaning through the play between the artist, the artwork, and the viewer. The gap between meaning and representation creates fun—as long as there are adequate clues to the artwork’s meaning. In addition, Kusahara [2009a] notes that play provides additional room, or tolerances, in the relationships between the members of the interaction process. For Kusahara:

[Play] is an extra space for our mind that may not directly contribute to productive activities but is needed for people to live better, and maintain the society. [Kusahara 2009a]

Ryota Kuwakubo’s Nicodama (2009) is an example of Mitate in art. Nicodama is an eyeball-like device equipped with an infrared transceiver and a magnetic mechanism that enables the Nicodama to be attached to almost any object. Although Nicodama are attached to individual objects, they can be electronically paired. When paired they communicate with each other by blinking together at random intervals. By attaching Nicodama to an object, the inanimate object is turned into an animate figure that appears to have personality. Kuwakubo explores people’s relationship with their environment by conceptualizing Nicodama as attractors, Kuwakubo explains:

The idea of this project is to draw attention to our surroundings by empathizing with ordinary objects around us. Ideally Nicodama should be applied to objects with personal contexts such as one’s own belongings or familiar objects in one’s room or neighborhood. The idea is derived from Japanese traditional thinking. People felt each of the objects around them had a spirit, and treated them with respect and care. Today we share a more objective and scientific approach in seeing things. While there is no doubt that it is important to maintain this attitude, the capacity for empathy is equally important. These two attitudes complement each other. I believe my project will help in an understanding of this. [Kuwakubo 2009]

Kuwakubo’s artistic approach makes the familiar unfamiliar in a playful manner. In doing so Nicodama offers viewers an opportunity to reflect on the everyday environment—an environment that is often paid little attention. In this sense, Mitate can be used to form a sense of strangeness or wonder in art. This idea of playfulness and Mitate in Device Art suggests an effective strategy for provoking viewers to reflect on technology.

Device Art aims to “push the boundaries of art into society, visualizing what technologies mean to us in a playful yet serious manner” [Kusahara 2010, 4]. In this sense, Device Art can be seen as the act of creating experimental objects that enable us to explore our relationship with technology. Whilst technology is closely intertwined with many aspects of our lives, we often fail to recognize or question technology’s effects and influences.

5 Conclusion

Our relationship with technology has always been an interdependent one. In contemporary culture, computer hardware and digital media systems mediate all facets of our lives. This paper has outlined an array of ideas that explore a non-Western apprehension of life to foster a deeper understanding of the interdependent relationships between humans and digital technology. We have offered an explanation of this apprehension through the lens of an Eastern (particularly Korean) understanding of this theme. We have argued that cultural practices such as culinary art (Bibimbap), commemorative rites (Jeusa) and folk painting traditions (Minhwai) cast these themes into sharper relief, evoking a sense of interdependence between humans and non-human entities, and prompt us to question how we act in the world and as such, introduce a different mode of thinking about our interdependent relationship to digital technology. This Eastern understanding of interdependent relationship in Korean cultural practices can be also found in Paik’s works and Device art in that both works pursue to create opportunities for views to reflect on “what technologies mean for us”.

We have framed an “Eastern” apprehension of digital media by refracting Paik’s work and Device Art through the lens of specific cultural traditions to arrest the specificity of these customs relative to the culture in which they appear. These non-Western conceptions of technology provide alternative points of difference through which to further examine contemporary digital media systems and the cultural dimensions they operate in. For example it is through a Japanese filter that the robotic works by Hiroshi Ishiguro Telenoid R1 (2010) and Elfoid P1 (2011)—which are often described as creepy [Hollister 2010] or framed in the West as “the nightmarish fetus-like telepresence robot” [Hornyk 2011]—resonate the cultural predispositions for humans to form intimate relationships with technology. It through a better understanding of this cultural refraction that the West may fully appreciate “technology-being-with-us”.

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