New Media & Society
http://nms.sagepub.com/

The secret war between downloading and uploading: Tales of the computer as culture machine

Andrew Utterson

New Media Society 2014 16: 1040
DOI: 10.1177/1461444814535723c

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://nms.sagepub.com/content/16/6/1040

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Peter Lunenfeld, *The secret war between downloading and uploading: Tales of the computer as culture machine*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011; xvii + 219 pp.: ISBN 9780262015479, $21.95 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Andrew Utterson, *Ithaca College, USA*

Whether we know it or not, science fact rather than science fiction, the world is on the cusp of a dangerous epidemic that threatens the health and well-being of every one of us —or so, at least, argues Peter Lunenfeld in his insightful new book. *The Secret War between Downloading and Uploading* charts the battle lines of its titular struggle. Put simply, for Lunenfeld, the act of "uploading" (and the participatory culture and engaged public sphere this term implies) is good for us, while downloading (passive, consumptive, consumerist, and rooted in hierarchical and centralized structures) is decidedly not—all of this in a volume of cultural criticism that at times reads like the advisory of a public health tsar and at others like the futorological musings of a Buckminster Fuller-esque visionary.

Lunenfeld's dietary and other culinary metaphors, in particular—at times cooked well beyond *al dente*—get the message across loud and clear: we are what we compute, as it were. In a widespread phenomenon of data obesity, we collectively inhabit a "sick culture" (p. 9) in which a form of cultural diabetes runs rampant, caused by a chronic imbalance between the data-calories we consume (our downloading is in this sense akin to a high-sugar diet) and those we expend (through the intellectually intensive and socially energetic acts of uploading). What is the antidote or cure for this condition or disease? When it comes to how we engage with our trusty computers, mindful and meaningful uploading is seen to trump mindless and meaningless downloading. A shift toward the former will give us nothing less than our very best chance of empowering the "human creative spirit" (p. 137) and ensuring that "the promise of the culture machine is fulfilled" (p. 17).

That this case for uploading—and the corollary critique of downloading as its binary opposite—is inherently judgmental, based on a particular set of cultural (not to mention ethical, philosophical, or moral) values, is not lost on Lunenfeld. After all, is it *necessarily* the case that downloading is bad for us? And, if so, like other contemporary public health debates (concerning cigarettes, alcohol, and so on), is it illiberal to condemn in the case of consenting adults? If one were to download this very book, for example, to read it with earnest focus, and to act (or consciously decide not to) having ruminated and reflected on its content and consequence, is that really comparable to a TV soap opera junkie or an addict of supersized Cokes? Either way, in a nifty methodological maneuver, Lunenfeld invokes the privilege and prerogative of the critic; his is not a moral judgment—"who is the critic to judge the meaningfulness of experiences to other people's lives?" (p. 24)—rather an aesthetic judgment concerning good and bad culture, and the conditions in which the former might thrive.

The dynamic between downloading and uploading is further detailed in terms of simulation and participation, two evolutionary memes or modes of networked computing which provide context for the conflicting tendencies at play in today's conceptions of what the computer is, could, or should be. In terms of simulation, it is the computer's unique capacity to simulate—that is, to assume the functions of existing machines, the realization of Alan Turing's 1940s vision of the computer as a "universal machine"—that

has led to its success as a mass medium. At the same time, it is this very quality—the computer as television, the computer as cinema, and so on—that threatens to perpetuate, needlessly so given the underlying architecture of networked data flow, a fundamentally passive relationship with information. The Web's broad simulation or absorption of the essence of television (one-way audio-visuality), for instance, risks recreating, or even amplifying, the prevailing download-only or download-mostly culture in which, for Lunenfeld, "the hardest task that television asks of its viewers is turning the power off after they have turned it on" (p. 8).

The meme of simulation, in this regard, risks running counter to that of participation. "From the mimeograph machine, to the advent of videotape, to fax technologies, to public access cable television, each new communication technology brings with it a new potential for participation" (p. 67), Lunenfeld argues. The networked computer is no different, having given rise to a multitude of one-to-many communications, defined by principles such as open source and perpetual beta, with the shift from a consumption to a production model a defining feature of its genetic lineage.

This Richard Dawkins–inspired evolutionary take on computer history is mapped most explicitly in an innovative 35-page afterword (which, per Lunenfeld's instructions, might also function as a foreword or even as a sidebar to the primary text) in which successive generations of our digital forebears are used to illuminate the present. Key figures illustrate not a totalizing historical account but a much more selective, whistle-stop tour of the computer's "rich and deep past" (p. 143), which takes in familiar pioneers including Vannevar Bush, J.C.R. Licklider, Thomas Watson, Sr., Thomas Watson, Jr., Douglas Engelbart, Alan Kay, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Tim Berners-Lee, Linus Torvalds, Larry Page, and Sergey Brin—a veritable who's who of "programmers, millionaires, and dreamers" (p. 145), as Lunenfeld puts it. Via this eclectic "collection of geniuses, warriors, pacifists, cranks, visionaries, entrepreneurs, great successes, and miserable failures" (p. xiii), the computer's evolutionary ascent is historicized and personified, giving perspective and context to today's tensions.

Ultimately, whether or not one agrees with Lunenfeld's polemic—and a polemic or manifesto it surely is—there is no doubting the timeliness and currency of its prognostic provocations. Indeed, it is testament to Lunenfeld that one's response after reading (or, put another way, after downloading its content) may very well be of the upload variety, as the tale of the computer continues to be told by the countless millions who interact with its networked iterations every day.

David Gunkel, *The machine question: Critical perspectives on AI, robots, and ethics*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012; 272 pp.: ISBN 9780262017435, $35.00 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Zachary J McDowell, *University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA*

Although not necessarily an ethical quandary that most face on a daily basis, "the machine question" has a long history within modern culture. Entities such as H.A.L. in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968), the replicants in *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), and the Puppet Master in *Ghost in the Shell* (Oshii, 1996) (to name just a few) have all