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Slow-Tuning Digital Culture

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Abstract. In the first part of this article, an overview of the cultural characteristics of digital culture will be given, which will then be applied to my theoretical model; I will henceforth refer to as the dual circle of digital culture. Following this, one of the key attributes of digital culture, speed/slowness will be discussed. By exploring escapist attitudes with the help of the slow movement and games, the cultural value of slowness will be established in the context of the changing landscape of digital culture.

Keywords: digital culture, dual circle of digital culture, slow, games

Accelerating changes

New technologies are spreading at an ever increasing pace. Looking at how many years it takes in 80% of the world's countries for a given technology to spread (a functional system to be built up), it can be seen that it took the railway 125 years to become used globally, while the same process only took 100 years in the case of the telephone, and less than 75 years in the case of the radio. Assuming an ever accelerating rate of penetration, the use of personal computers spread over a period of about 25 years, while the same figure for the use of mobile phones is approximately 20 years (Datta 2011). The spread of mobile Internet is anticipated to take place even faster, but only preliminary estimates are available at this point.[1]

The ever more increasing speed of the market saturation achieved by technologies is shown in an analysis by Michael DeGusta (DeGusta 2012). Using four source groups (ITU, Pew, United States Statistical Office, and the Wall Street Journal), DeGusta studied the spread of various technologies in the past few decades in the case of the United States. His most important finding was that three phases of a technology's spread can be distinguished: one from the launch to 10% saturation, another between 10% and 40% saturation, and the last one from 40% to 75%. The spread of landline phones and electricity took off at a

1 See, for example, the report by GSMA: http://www.gsmamobileeconomy.com/GSMA_ME_Report_2014_R2_WEB.pdf

very slow pace (10 percent market saturation was achieved in 25 and 30 years, respectively), while mobiles moved faster, producing the same saturation in just two and a half years. Of course, the cost and time of building up a technology's infrastructure, as well as the size of the investment are key factors; however, these categories do not apply to tablets. It is interesting to note that televisions achieved 10% saturation over about 11 years, while this took smart phones eight years only. When considering the second phase (10–40%), a rearrangement can be observed among technologies. The spread of electricity showed acceleration in this phase, as it reached 30% saturation within the scope of only 15 years. An acceleration can be seen in the case of televisions and smart phones, too: both achieved this rate of increase within two to three years. Televisions achieved 75% penetration from 40% in five years. As the penetration of smart phones and tablets has not yet achieved this level, no comparison can be made with these. The speeding up of the spread of televisions is spectacular; the same rate of acceleration cannot be said for personal computers, although there is some acceleration here too (PCs achieved 10% in nine years, 40% in 14 years and 75% in 13 years). Based on currently available data, tablets and smart phones seem to be following an accelerating path, but this can only be stated with certainty in ten years' time.

I wish to highlight an important aspect of the ever increasing spread of technologies: this spread is faster than what would correspond to the previously measured rate of knowledge transfer from one biological generation to the next. Parents have neither the knowledge nor the practical experience to enable them to pass a model on to young people.

Digital culture has undergone large-scale quality and quantity changes in the last fifteen years. Instead of a 'computer by-product,' a living, thriving, and expanding social phenomenon (one in interaction with traditional culture) evolved (Rab 2004), primarily as a result of the penetrating changes of the information society. Although this process began almost fifty years ago, a development boom in digital culture was triggered by and has been continuously fuelled by the fast-pace spread of broadband Internet and digital imaging tools.

Today's digital world has numerous new attributes. None of these are technologically driven, but rather the result of cultural change. The digital world is defined by a two-way interaction: technological changes are primarily induced by cultural changes, which then also exert an impact on culture. The characteristics to be listed on the following pages are more in-depth changes, independent of concrete technological devices; however, specific technological equipment (or a group of them) becoming popular and increasingly widespread might alter the rate of the changes discussed below; an example for this is the most important changes nowadays, i.e. the breakthrough of smart phones and the revolution of wireless, 'omnipresent' Internet access. These changes are not isolated from one

another, but they interact with each other time and again, influence, enhance, and curb one another. Most typically, they exist simultaneously, amplifying each other's influences; here we can highlight, for example, the close relationship that interactivity and interconnectivity have with multitasking, but the phenomenon of the crisis of identity can also be linked with an increase in uncertainty.

The appearance of digital culture was not the first communication revolution in the history of mankind. When Johannes Gutenberg printed the Bible in 1454, he also launched a communication revolution (Harnad 1991). In contrast to the changeable nature of oral communication, the printed text, as reproduced unchanged, introduced a rational and reliable communication channel that was easy to follow. Communication through printed texts allowed people to see the world in a more analytical, rational, and organized way. The dominance of the printed word was first dented in the 1950s, when television started to spread. And now the spread of digital culture, and within that the spread of digital media in particular, have put a definite end to the 450-year hegemony of the printed word: digital literacy and digital culture in general require new skills and approaches and a different way of comprehension. Kovarik talks about more communication revolutions: first, the revolution of printing, then the visual revolution (triggered by photography), the electronic revolution (radios and then televisions playing the key role), and finally the digital revolution (computers and networks) (Kovarik 2011). In my opinion, the revolution of knowledge acquisition and sharing is about to begin, its driving force being smart phones and the mobile Internet.

Characteristics of digital culture

In the past fifteen years, I have been studying the different characteristics of digital culture. As they do not form an integral part of my article's main line of reasoning, below, I will only provide a short description of these characteristics.

Oral literacy: digital literacy is far closer to oral communication what preceded the revolution of printing than it is to the written communication that emerged after the appearance of printing. In a digital environment, the boundary between the written and the spoken word is blurred (Ong 2010, Szécsi 1998).

Distancing from the source: digital forms can become independent from their traditional (prime) source, which is why digital information gaining ground creates fear and doubt in many people, and indeed there are new opportunities of abuse in a digital world: the authenticity of a text, of an image, or of a film extract cannot be ascertained at first glance.

Permanence: everything we do in our digital environment leaves a trace. The time and date of opening a file is stored just like the love poems we type in; when viewing an average website, the amount of information that leaves our

computers is virtually the same as that arriving on it. In the information society, it is not retaining information but deletion and the right to forget that constitute the real challenge.

Copiability: digital information is easy to copy, and once joined into a network the opportunities for this are infinite. This phenomenon generated new ways of distribution and spreading, which turned the contents industry upside down.

Instantaneousness: in a digital world, we can share our experiences, send and read our emails instantly. IM and chat culture create the impression of non-stop contact, not to mention that news about events that are taking place in other corners of the world can be instantly accessed, through several communication channels, etc.

Interactivity and interconnectivity: these are two key terms when we talk about the digital world (and digital society). Everything is interactive in a digital environment, even television use, and it is natural to us that any cultural object can be altered. Interconnectivity (a gift to humanity by the electronic devices of the information society) creates the opportunity for constant access and contact, which has an impact on many traditional cultural patterns, from our personal space to our work culture.

Perception and experience: the mentality of the users of digital culture has undergone vast changes in the last ten years; they have learnt that perception can be digitally manipulated. It is now generally known that the world we perceive can be digitally generated. Moreover, for the first time in human culture, it is suggested that our perception of virtual and non-virtual reality might be essentially the same. This lack of distinction is strengthened by the trend that technologies originally used in the entertainment industry are also used in other industries, and also by projecting a virtual environment onto the real world (augmented reality, LBS technologies).[2] Thanks to the virtual worlds of the future, the real world that surrounds us will blend together with our digital environment.

Identity: in every culture, individuals play many roles during their lifetime, assuming many identities. The number of these roles and the speed at which they replace one another do not only depend on the individuals but also on their cultural disposition and the influence of their environment. A new factor emerged in the information society: a set of human identities largely impacted by technological circumstances, i.e. network identity. As a result of computers, visualization technologies, and mainly digital identification, we can be somewhere without being physically present; others can assume our identity without looking

2 Augmented reality refers to an extended reality, in which a virtual 'layer' – usually providing additional information – can be visualized with the help of technological devices (e.g. special glasses, mobile phones, etc.). LBS stands for location-based technology and constitutes technologies aimed at providing relevant information and services of interest to users at a given time and place based on identifying the users' location.

like us, without even having the same sex; and what is even more alarming is that in the meantime these people retain their own personality. Our virtual identity is faced with a dual burden: it is crucially important, yet it can be separated from its rightful owner.

Insecurity: the issue of information society being a risk society has been emphasized by many. However, it is a misleading approach since people in medieval times were exposed to the same degree of risk – or perhaps much greater – due to the changeable social structure, healthcare, and the natural environment they lived in, which they could not control or have any influence over. In the case of the natural peoples, this lack of control reached such a level that magic and religious rites were used as a means of trying to control and influence their environment.

Speed and virtuality: every new technology serves the purpose of increasing speed. The very first trend was to increase the speed of changing one's physical location, but nowadays the ultimate objective is to increase the speed of information exchange. This acceleration can be felt in our everyday lives. The speed of modern technologies exceeds the natural speed of the human, biological organisms, which is difficult to grasp and creates tension that needs to be dealt with; it must be addressed both by individuals and communities. In a digital environment, there is a distance between users and the sources of information and objects. Hence, we feel distanced from palpable reality, and the role of trust and reliability has assumed greater importance. Perhaps the biggest cultural switch-over is taking place in people's appreciation for 'real' and virtual cultural objects. In other words, are virtual cultural objects regarded as valuable by people living in a given culture? The seemingly non-palpable nature of digital cultural objects and patterns might easily lead to weightlessness. Nevertheless, in the coming decades, people will most likely accept that digital actions, digital words, and digital objects are real acts, real words, and real objects in every respect.

Multitasking: in practice, multitasking means that several tasks are (can be) managed simultaneously. Typical examples for this are media consumption and entertainment (Székely 2014). Intertwining, simultaneous activities divide our attention, and thus certain elements can be easily pushed to the background. The opportunity of continuous online presence enables us to manage several interactions in parallel communication spaces, as a result of which the 'blending together' of personal, group, and mass communication is bound to happen. Similarly to background media consumption, we can talk about the appearance of background communication too, which makes it possible for users to be simultaneously present in different communication spaces, thanks to broadband connection. There are two sides to how multitasking is viewed. On the one hand, it is doubtlessly a strongly present and indelible phenomenon, which is used to different extents and at different levels of success by any individual, community,

or, for example, business. On the other hand, multitasking definitely disperses attention, frequently producing quasi-entertainment, quasi-work processes, quasi-recreation, and quasi-connections.

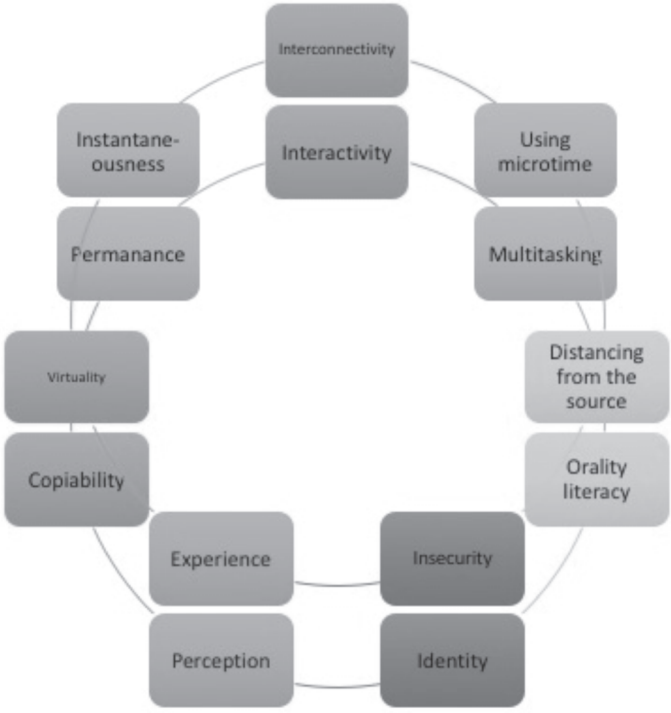
Using microtime: in my opinion, this characteristic of digital culture has been assuming increasing importance since smart phones (and tablets) became widespread. This technology enables instant availability (it was mostly necessary so that incoming calls would not destroy running processes, such as reading and gaming, for example). One of the important attributes of mobile games is that there is virtually no loading time or, if it is interrupted, the process resumes in 1-2 seconds. Besides gaming, in my view, online chat plays a crucial role in spending microtime. Smart phones display incoming messages, so users do not have to constantly watch and wait. It can be seen if someone writes us a message, so we can quickly reply while walking or while the traffic light is red. In another time fragment, we can glance at the screen again, check and reply, etc. The use of microtime increasingly reduces the chance of being bored, while also teaching users how to focus their attention in short time spans (too). Thus, we have the great 'rival' of multitasking: when spending microtime, we do not manage simultaneous activities but quickly interrupted, consecutive, and alternating processes. This trend can potentially lead to the weakening of long-term concentration.

The dual circle of digital culture

In the last decade, I have been researching various phenomena linked to digital culture. In the previous section, I provided a brief description of each one of the main characteristics of digital culture, and over the years I found that these 14 characteristics can be arranged into a complex system comprising dynamic dichotomies that reinforce each other. Situations that arise in the context of digital culture result from the mutual interaction and attributes of these elements.

In order to visually represent this system, I first established axes between the above mentioned characteristics and created two circles. One circle contains the characteristics of one of the axes, while the other one those of the other axis. Since the dichotomies contained in the two circles complement and provide an explanation for each other, I drew a dual circle, in which the position of each element is carefully designed in relation to its pair in the dichotomy as well as to the other elements.

I named this model the dual circle of digital culture (*Graph 1*). The characteristics are arranged in dichotomies: Interactivity – Interconnectivity; Multitasking – Using microtime; Orality literacy – Distancing from the source; Identity – Insecurity; Perception – Experience; Copiability – Virtuality; Permanance – Instantaneousness.



Source: author's proposal

Graph 1. The dual circle of digital culture

Oral literacy and distancing from the source form a dichotomy intended to occupy a position on the other side of the circle, relative to instantaneousness and permanence. In a 3D representation, the two circles would not run side by side but above each other; however, in a 2D representation, such an arrangement could not be read. The categories of multitasking and using microtime have a similar effect, but their modi operandi are each other's opposite, while the fragmentation of time affects perception and virtuality.

The dual circle of digital culture is a system of interpretation. Its primary objective is to represent the multi-layered and complex nature of the operation of digital culture, but it is suitable to be used for future framework system analyses. It is possible and worth further exploring the elements of the dual circle of digital culture. It is not only the elements of the dual circle that form complementary pairs (dichotomies), but some of the notions themselves are ambiguous. One such notion is speed, since one of the highly important and typical characteristics of today's digital culture is slowing down and slowness, as well as its extreme endpoint: breaking out of the information society.

Go slower, live longer

The Slow Movement started in Italy in 1986, occasioned by the opening of a new McDonald's restaurant. Carlo Petrini organized a demonstration protesting against all the seemingly convincing advantages of fast food restaurants, focusing on the quality of the food, the importance of the culture of eating, and the role of enjoying life. The word 'slow' was originally not intended to suggest slowing down our pace of life, but it was rather used as an opposite to fast food. The slogan soon spread from making and eating food to other areas, such as travelling, raising children, reading, and – more recently – to Internet consumption. It has also become widespread in the world of work, emphasizing the value of quality work, time spent, and concentration as opposed to the rushed multitasking type of work. It did not take long before the word 'slow' entered the area of urban design: Cittaslow refers to an urban design philosophy built around and supporting the importance of people and the value of time spent in cities, suggesting that urban time should slow down and assume a human scale. This trend started in 1999, and in 2010 the Hungarian town of Hódmezővásárhely became such a 'slow town'.[3]

The slow movement, or rather slogan, is not a complete system of actual techniques, rules, and processes but much rather the expression of a feeling and an approach. Similarly to other hype-type notions, slow also lends itself to being combined with other words to attribute deeper meaning to it (slow housing, slow money, etc.). Taking a more superficial approach, the slow movement does not seem to be much different from a simple principle of organizing our lives: spend more time on important things, spend more time on yourself, enjoying life, and trying to exclude less important things from your life. Simplified, these slogans and descriptions can be summed up as follows: time is valuable, so try to do less but live/do/plan better. It is important to note here that besides time management and planning other crucial slogans of the Slow Movement there are sincerity and community (establishing relationships).

However, taking a more in-depth approach, the slow mentality is a (social) response springing from people's need to reclaim control over their own lives and reduce the burden of stress. Therefore, the Slow Movement, understandably, mainly appears in the context of the workplace. Yet, the workplace is typically the environment where average employees have little opportunity to create their own rules and pace, so – either because of teamwork or because of the rules and regulations, routines, and tasks of the workplaces – slow continues to be an internal organizing principle and a dream that might come true one day. The above described nature of the information society (several simultaneous identities, a myriad of online and offline impulses, multiple tasks to be done at the same time) by definition makes any slow ambitions impossible to implement,

3 http://www.cittaslow.org

except when individuals are willing to pay any price to observe the new rules of slow, and in cases when slow plans do not induce radical changes but rather involve fine-tuning.

In my view, the recent extensions of the Slow Movement (e.g. slow Internet) are catchy buzz words merely able to draw attention (for those interested) to living life in a more planned way. Available online articles on the subject are not more than life coaching advice provided by some clever individuals with a tendency to write what they try to sell as general truths and rules. The slow food and slow city movements were more concrete and exerted greater influence, and they focused more attention on the social impact and the social character of slow. Nevertheless, they can be interpreted as anti-globalization cultural phenomena rather than a reaction against digital culture.

Breaking out

As can be seen above, the tensions created by the information society brought with them a need for more and more people to slow down and have more control over their lives. Some people are not content with simply reorganizing their lives but choose to completely break out of the constraints of the information society. In the following section, two ways of this will be discussed: in one of them, the means of breaking out is digital culture itself (computer games), while in the other case the final objective is complete disengagement, i.e. going offline.

Computer games as a means of escape

In my primary research, I studied the world of computer games and gamers: computer games are one of the most spectacular and impactful areas of exploring and being immersed in digital culture. One of the objectives of my research was to find out as much about players as possible. I conducted an online questionnaire (exploratory research, with a sample of 147 persons) asking them about their motivations and attitudes. After performing a factor analysis of the data, I established five types of players.

For the first type of player, there were three key variables: it is important for them to wander in the virtual world exploring locations, non-game characters and areas not yet discovered by others, as well as to get to know other players. A clear picture can be formed of a player, who is a curious discoverer immersing themselves in the digital world and playing computer games for the sake of playing. I named this type ‘the adventurer’ since the word encapsulates the characteristics of this type and it can be associated with one of the most popular hero types of fantasy novels (adventurers), who are outstanding heroes freely

roaming in their world, having superhuman abilities, and rising above everyday rules while predominantly acting for the benefit of society.

The second type of player has the following three key variables: for him or her, it is important to defeat other players, to compete with them, and to get to know other players. This type places emphasis on his or her relationship with other game characters and fundamentally regards the game as a challenge and rivalry. I call this type 'the gladiator,' alluding to the fact that they are fighters who do not fight just for themselves but also to win the attention of others.

The third type of player is the kind who often chats online and frequently engages in long, serious conversations with his or her online acquaintances; moreover, he or she establishes living relationships with online acquaintances who have also provided help in solving non-game-related problems. So, this player builds relationships, and enjoys doing so. I named this type 'the bard' since during their games these players concentrate mainly on their relationships with others and they also excel in problem-solving. Thanks to their relationships, they are both the entertainers and the entertained.

The fourth type of player often plays just for the sake of relaxation, and they enjoy playing role games with their characters – this type is a genuine lover of games. I call this type 'the magus,' who lets him- or herself be enchanted for mere entertainment, adapting to the world he or she is in, while playfully changing identities within a given game. The word 'magician' better describes this free type of player playing tricks, but the word 'magus' fits in better with the terminology of role-play games, and thus the names given to the different player types are more unified (as they are frequently used terms in computer games too).

The fifth type of player uses online games merely as a means of distracting his or her attention from other things. An escapist attitude can be detected here, although only in a blurred form: games are a means of breaking out of everyday reality (but not necessarily to escape from problems!), and looking for a world governed by other than the mundane, customary and old rules of everyday life. I have named this type 'the ranger' since in fantasy literature rangers are the characters and heroes who, having become sated with the life of their city or community, wander alone, generally in nature, enjoying their solitude and their own rules of living their lives.

For some of the players, games serve as a means of escaping, hiding away from or breaking out of the real (and the digital) world. When assessing the types of players, it can be ascertained that every player has a primary approach and basic expectations of games, but their attitudes might change depending on their mood, the virtual world of the given game, and the other players. These changes might occur for longer and shorter periods, and it is crucially important what the players are looking for in playing games at a given point or period in their lives.

The other way of breaking out of the information society is to curtail or ban the various tools of digital culture. This attitude can not only be seen in the Slow Movement but also in various ideas and stages of raising children. The restrictions are usually time-related (e.g. the child is only allowed a certain amount of Internet time per day). These restrictions are as inefficient as the limitations imposed on watching television about three decades ago – virtually none. While in the area of raising children restrictions might serve the purpose of learning self-discipline since the limits must be learnt. However, a similar (self-)denial of digital tools produces little results. We can distinguish between complete and partial breakthrough (I use a computer, but I have not got Facebook or I have not got a smart phone to stop myself from constantly messing with it). A paradise for those wishing to break out of the information society is Green Bank, West Virginia (United States of America), where the world's largest fully steerable radio telescope can be found. In order to ensure the telescope's smooth operation, all other transmissions are banned in the area, including radios and mobile phones. The small town has a population of only 143, with most of them suffering from oversensitivity to electromagnetic radiation and have found a safe haven there.[4] Of course, Green Bank is an extreme example since people, as cultural beings, should not use such 'self-mutilating' measures to create a liveable environment for themselves, but instead they should exploit and implement larger-scale cultural changes.

Cultural games

A good example for dual games in digital culture is chat culture. At first glance, the situation is simple: I am sitting at my computer, and if a chat message comes in, I will or will not reply. The spread of smart phones brought about the triumph of chat culture, since the IM services (supplemented with making phone calls and sending files) basically changed the communication practices that had been used for generations in the past. Instead of making a phone call or sending text messages, communication is now typically done on Viber, Skype, Snapchat, or Facebook Messenger. We are enjoying the benefits of non-stop availability, virtually free of charge, and it is possible to customize our communication practices. At the same time, non-stop availability comes with a price: if we do not reply instantly to a message (it is interesting that the common 'solution' here is not to switch over to another channel, e.g. make a phone call), the sender of the message will launch a barrage of further messages or will feel personally insulted as our 'failure' to reply is perceived by him or her as being ignored. It is especially true for messages with a return receipt confirmation, as in this case the sender can see that the addressee has actually seen the message – i.e. he

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Green_Bank,_West_Virginia

or she was in close proximity of the device. Although it is understandable that sometimes the receiver of a message has no time to reply or the circumstances make it impossible, etc., the expectation to reply and the feeling of resentment are virtually guaranteed. Both the effect and counter-effect of this phenomenon are well known: the effect is that there are people who will grab a keyboard in any moment and situation to provide instant reply to incoming messages, even if it means neglecting the real-life situation they are in (a lesson, personal conversation, watching TV with others); its counter-effect is a gigantic 'game' in which the participants do everything they can to see their messages but want to make sure it is not known to the other party – in this way, he or she can gain some time to reply or to make a decision.

It is my personal opinion that digital culture has just started to exert a far-reaching impact on our lives. It is my contention that digital culture will bring about radical cultural, economic, and even biological changes in the next ten years in our lives, unprecedented – at this speed – in the cultural history of mankind. This process might be extremely fast; nevertheless, it is a process: a process that is bound to be accompanied by a great deal of self-cleansing, refining, and reinterpretation. In the past five years, several examples have shown these changes taking place; for example, we can see a culture of using phones in community spaces gradually forming (even though not everybody observes this), while the rules of e-mail, chat, and IM culture are being increasingly fine-tuned. As a result, the – real and self-generated – stress suffered by users is significantly reduced.

Culture is a means which in this case will lead to the release of all kinds of stress created by high speed and instantaneousness. The Slow Movement is the movement of planning and design. It is a preliminary sign of the future normalization of the excessive need for speed in today's digital culture, which in the future will not be a source of stress to be avoided but an opportunity to be successfully exploited. A productive response to today's acceleration is not to break out of the information society and make repeated efforts to curb or stop the on-going processes, but instead to harmoniously integrate it into our own lives. Only this way will an (often demonized) source of tension become a potential means to increase our quality of life.

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