

HAIKU HAS NO FUTURE

It was a few months ago that on a lazy Sunday afternoon I found myself to be in Brussels at the FOSDEM conference, where François Revol organized a very successful Alt-OS development room, filled with all sorts of presentations on the world of the alternative operating systems. As probably the only non-computer science person, I got a slot as well and I decided to give a presentation with this same title. Now just imagine, I was scheduled on the last day, nearing the end of the conference (around four or five in the afternoon) and knowing the visitor group, I did not expect much. As such, I decided to prepare a discussion session for the ten or so people to show up. Now about five minutes before I was scheduled to go, people started trickling in. And to my pleasant dismay – if ever such a thing is possible – I ended up having a full house. Now why would a large number of computer geeks or – more nicely put – Open Source fanatics be interested in what a silly humanities guy has to say? I started to think about that, and I realize that this is in fact a very central question to everybody that donates time or money to these projects: what will be its future? Or put in another way, how can we, as actors in the always changing, always new information technology sector determine a path? That is the problem I would like to give a stab at in the coming twenty minutes.¹

Now let us go back to my original thesis. “Haiku has No Future.” I find the means of expression – to ‘have’ a future – a bit curious. I don’t know about your native languages, but in Dutch it is the same, the odd combination of the present version of the verb ‘to have’ and that which is unknown, the future. What do you have when you have a future? You have something that is not yet there, something that is undefined. The logic of having ‘no future’ is even more odd. We still don’t know what the thing is that we could have gotten, but we don’t have it anyway.

ON HAVING A FUTURE



I first saw this painting² in a lecture by professor Joyce Goggin, whose title was a variation of the song: “The future is so bright I have to wear shades.” This is a portrait of Nathaniel Olds, painted in 1837. As a probably wealthy American who is trying to mimic the grandeur and status of money in the Old World, he is trying to show that he is wealthy in the most American way possible: by being horribly explicit about it. It happens to be that the green glasses he is wearing are not only a fashion statement, they are also there for protection. They were worn by the rich few who could afford the extremely bright and expensive Argand lamps, in order to protect their eyes. So the new technology promised a shiny future, while at the same time completely blinding the beholder of that future.

We are at a point in time where we struggle with our future as well. And this is not only the uncertainty and uneasiness that surrounds R2, but I would argue that even R1 is a problematic future idea. The discussions that seem to pop up about whether or not to have an alpha 2 or a beta 1, they all share a common theme in that there seem to be problems in defining the feature set. So the problem I so keenly will try to solve is how to find a path to a future?

To revisit what I just said, there is a split in this world between those that have a future, and those that do not. The first category is the category of the Apples, the Microsofts and the Googles. Why do they have the future? Money has always been tied to the future. Investments are made to at a later stage yield profit. The economic

¹ This is the written text of a presentation that was given at the BeGeistert 022 gathering on April 11 2010 in Düsseldorf.

² Copyright on this painting has expired. You can find a high-resolution version at Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_Nathaniel_Olds_by_Jeptha_Homer_Wade.jpg

system is built around the notion that every year there is a real growth. And to return to the painting of Nathaniel, well, he did not amount to much, but the painter Jepta Homer Wade, went on to become one of the founding owners of the Western Union Telegraph company. The large-scale implementation of the telegraph in trade made serious changes in the economic world. For example, it radically changed the notion of space. Whereas previously there were several local markets for particular raw materials, the telegraph unified this. It also changed the role of time and the position of the future, as trade became near-instant the future comes so close it is almost tangible.

Now can Haiku emulate that model? I am convinced we cannot. With the risk of sounding like a cynical Marxist, I would say the big ones have the ability to spell the rules of market capitalism: to put it bluntly, they are able to create future market demands for products that you and I never knew we needed. Whatever trick is working for them, it is thoroughly based in the futurity that is inherently embedded in the logic of money. Trying to do what they do will only lead to us copying whatever they are doing. I read a really interesting article by Matthew Fuller, one of the founders of Software Studies in the humanities, and imagine this guy that really hates Microsoft Word for being the feature hog it is. When discussing Abiword and Open Office writer, his response is awkwardly clear: "Mimesis is Misery!" Their appealing future obviously is not just in the feature set of their software, but in the way they are able to do business in general.

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So I will argue that for our own future, we cannot learn anything from those that have a future. A common method in the humanities is the approach to compare and contrast. So instead of trying to find an answer how to get a future, is more productive to look at others that do not have a future either and see what we can learn from them. I will explore this question by taking a particular branch of queer theory as reference point.

I will be swiftly taking you through three fields that I study, namely the arena of structural linguistics, Queer Theory and Lacanian psycho-analysis. Mind you, what I am going to tell you is the extreme summary, the Cliff-notes so to say. I have totally removed the context of these concepts, but then again, I cannot repeat today in 30 minutes about what I have been working with and learning about for four years. Please bear with me.

The field of structural linguistics is the field invented by Ferdinand de Saussure. He made an attempt to make of a model of how language makes meaning so that it could be studied systematically. The central concept, the atomic component of language, is that of the **sign**. This is the smallest unit of meaning. Now a sign consists of two components, a **signifier** and a **signified**. If we look at the word 'apple', the written component, that ordered set of letters, is the signifier. The signified is that what it refers to, the object or concept in the real world. Important is for De Saussure that this relation between signifier and signified is completely arbitrary. It differs between languages. The Dutch 'appel' or German 'apfel' may have a similar look, but 'pomme' proves the point. Later on, the French philosopher Roland Barthes extended the concepts of signs to images, but also social practices. The contribution of De Saussure has opened up all the study of how we humans make meaning in this world.

This basic framework of how we make meaning has been a fruitful basis for all kinds of branches of study. A very large field that is set on studying the 'queer', not only queer sexualities, what is often called gay, lesbian and transgender, but in essence everything that does not follow the norm of how a human being should behave. Now this field has been in development since the sixties. At first it was aimed at trying to describe queer practices as reasonable variations of heteronormative practices, a vision that led to actions such as the opening of the marriage to two people of the same gender. Nowadays, there seems to be an emphasis on celebrating the queerness of queer studies, which can be likened to challenging institutions such as marriage for everyone. Within that category falls the work of Lee Edelman who wrote the book "No Future: Queer theory and the death drive." His title inspired mine, by the way. Now this is where I urge you to remember that this is the short hand version, his argumentation is highly convoluted.

The conclusion is this. Edelman recognizes another focus of futurity: Politics. He describes politics as a very intense set of signs that are based on the future. However, because politicians know as much about what it means to have a future as we do, their focus is on a sign that signifies the future: they focus on the image of the child. Even though his political analysis is American-centric, I also feel the same mechanics at work here in Europe. It is election season in The Netherlands right now, and knowing this I am constantly confronted by politicians using the expression 'for the children,' or when they want to be affective, 'for our children.' Now queer sexualities are constantly denied access to this image, they can try all they want, but they never get access to that what leads to the future: the procreation of life. But it is also a political strategy, especially in the United States where being queer is a synonym for being a pedophile in popular discourse. The other example Edelman gives is the broad anti-abortion movement, which is founded on the principles that the unborn is a child, and to kill it, is to not only deny the fetus any future, but to deny everybody a future.

We as open source developers share the fact that we do not have a future. I have argued that the future for corporate America is based on their insane funding streams. Nonetheless Edelman proposes to celebrate this non-futurity of the queer, and to exploit it. So the question is, how do we exploit it?

To answer that question we have to turn to Lacanian psycho-analytics. I guess we are all familiar with the popular vision of Freud that most of our selves is rooted in the unconscious, and that this unconscious gives us drives that leads us to naughty fetishes. Lacan is a French psycho-analyst. He is categorized in the French linguistic turn, which not entirely coincidentally started with Ferdinand de Saussure. Lacan made many contributions to the field, but of most important is that he argued that part of the unconscious is structured like language. This is called the **Symbolic**. The symbolic is a universal unconscious structure that functions according to the rules of De Saussure. A second realm is the **Imaginary**. This is the unstructured part of us that drives us to satisfy our most basic urges. It is cultivated during the mirror stage, which is the stage in which a child first recognizes himself in the mirror, and then realizes that whatever he sees is not his complete self, only a part. The imaginary does not operate in language which makes it incompatible to the controlled symbolic. Finally, there is that what we call the **Real**. This real escapes the other categories, it is that which cannot be spoken or written. And as the real cannot be reduced to meaning, it also does not lend itself to being a symbolic representation. Human behavior and the problems that arise there can be analyzed through the conflicts that occur between these three realms.

Edelman is concerned with the role of politics within these three concept. He proposes that politics is concerned with the wish to consolidate the symbolic and the imaginary. This of course is a set up for failure, so instead of resolving the problem right now, they are deferring the solution by employing the image of the child, which of course has meaning in both realms. This is the image that keeps the machinery of the symbolic going. And because it works at the level of the symbolic, it means that everybody is structured by the logic. Thus that implies that being queer, not underwriting the logic of the child, is always a controversial reading, and not an alternative one.

Then how does queerness work? Edelman compares queerness to irony. Paul de Man argued that irony hollows out the meaning of words; it disconnects the signifier from the signified. We read a text which has a certain meaning, but because the irony transforms, parasites on that meaning. Queerness operates in a similar way. For example the film *Transamerica* (Tucker, 2005) tells the story of a pre-operation transsexual women – thus who still is a man – that has to fetch her son from prison. Throughout the film the joke is made that she is not his mother. In this case, the queer nature of the main character hollows out the existing meaning of the word 'mother.' Edelman actually argues that in these cases a little bit of the Real seeps into the symbolic.

CONCLUSIONS

There are three distinct lessons to be learnt here when we think about how we should behave for our own future. First of all, even though we do not have any access to the future the way the Apples, Googles and Microsofts are able to construct it, we are still heavily influenced by it: it is our frame of reference. In other words, even though we are a 'queer' operating system, we should realize that every discussion we have is within the language that is set by those with the future, by the symbolic. For example, our concepts of releases or the ideas on what users might want follow this structure, this pre-existing logic which is based on the flow of capital. We cannot avoid this influence, but it we should take its existence into account when we think about this project. Because – and this brings me to the second lesson – we are a 'queer' project that is developing a queer operating system. This is what we should keep in mind. Our work will not ever define the future of operating systems, but what it does do is undermine the monotone machinery of the competition. It is in this niche that we can operate best.

Because this leads to the third lesson: we are allowed to be playful and have fun! The knowledge that we do not have access to the mainstream the way we are now is in no way a disappointment, instead it allows us for a playful approach to the goals of the project. There are a variety of models that can be envisioned on how to structure our work flow to increase the existence of fun. With all this information, I hope to have given you all something to keep in mind when we have our next round of alpha 2 or beta 1 or R2 discussions on the mailing list. Because even though we have no future, it does not mean that there will not arrive one eventually. Let us get there the most pleasant way possible.

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