

Sean Taylor of Softday in conversation with Craig Coleman, Curator, Arts and Sciences Museum, Macon, Georgia, USA, 2008

CC: How have artists integrated the computer into their chosen mediums/disciplines?

ST: Softday uses data and computer software as a central building block in our creative project. Our approach to researching projects is to develop a central theme and then source large volumes of data (mathematical information), and see if we can manipulate it to create data specific and original artworks. Past examples include the use of rainfall data for the whole country of Ireland for a full year, tracking the migration patterns of Atlantic salmon over a full year, and all email and SMS messages sent to a radio station over a period of months. To manipulate this data, we need computers and a lot of purpose designed software. We have used the computer to flavour our works with for example Traditional Irish Music, in MIDI or score format, to create a distinctly Irish flavour in our sound compositions.

CC: In what ways has the computer helped artists to make works that were not possible before the invention of such technology?

ST: All our collaborative work would, in principle, not be possible without computers. Computers give us the power to cut through all kinds of interesting complexities. We can choose to work on a micro-level (what is a note or what is a pixel) or macro-level (like sculpting the time and space of a work). We can move seamlessly between these levels until we have created the aesthetic outputs we are looking for.

CC: What new uses for computers have artists discovered?

ST: At the core of many of our works we are using artificial neural networks, which is a form of machine learning algorithm used in various artificial intelligence applications. We have tweaked and perhaps corrupted these algorithms so that they produce new stuff instead of recognizing old stuff, turning the mathematics inside-out. We have also developed different kinds of heuristic filters to shape the output from the networks into playable format, for example for the Irish Chamber Orchestra. We also use computer based sound editing software's to augment our data based sound compositions

CC: How has computer technology affected art made today?

ST: Computers and computer software programmes have fundamentally altered the way artists work today. Artists have more flexibility and control over media that were once the domain of specialists. For Softday, the computer is the brush or chisel that allows us to create and shape one element out of another element. In some cases, computers have enabled new forms of interactive art with both artists and audiences participating in the creation and appreciation of work.

CC: How has it affected our assumptions about art?

ST: Our assumptions about art are always being challenged. Computer generated art however will only be as engaging as the artists who conceptually utilise this new tool.

CC: How has the use of the computer affected our assumptions about art and "traditional" mediums?

ST: In an ideal situation computer generated artworks should compliment the existing aesthetic of more traditional approaches to art production. Therefore if the work is engaging and approachable it should work on the same level that all artworks operate on. Computers are only a tool and a means to an end, it is what we say with this language creatively that will make this type of art work relevant or not.