The Digital Object

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"Talking Carl," created by Yann Le Coroller. Image courtesy the Museum of Modern Art.

We are used to objects that respond to our actions. When crossing a street, we push a button and a green light appears. The light may say "walk," but it actually does not tell us anything more than that we have just pressed the button. The system does not check for moving cars or verify our safety; it simply announces our intention of crossing the street to others involved in the action and relies on their intelligence to accomplish it.

With contemporary electronic media, by contrast, we expect everyday objects not only to talk to us but also to interact, to manifest basic autonomy and, ideally, to behave like intelligent entities. We expect objects to communicate in meaningful and emotionally engaging ways, to entertain and care for us. With this in mind, I visited the recent *Talk to Me* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City.

A "Talking Carl" installation strategically placed near the entrance set the tone. Talking Carl is a highly successful Android and iPhone app in which an anthropomorphic red bloblike character reacts with giggles and bodily expressions to touches (via touch screen). It repeats what we say to it using silly voices. At the exhibition, a small crowd was hanging around for a chance to play with Talking Carl. Kids were not the only ones waiting patiently, although they showed the most endurance.

The scene highlighted a unique quality of exhibitions such as *Talk to Me* as well as many of the digital objects they feature: They are cross-generational. They engage members of a broad section of society through intuitive interfaces and emotional content. This kind of engagement is filtering into the ways we structure and deliver knowledge, and ultimately makes the authoring and consumption of culture more democratic. We all have something to say and add to our society—a premise of the Web 2.0 paradigm is crowdsourcing and collective wisdom.

This points to our new expectation of what an object is and does. Whereas the Industrial Revolution empowered us with an endless number of tools, each with a discrete purpose, the present digital framework reverses this trend and dissolves objects into a ubiquitous and universal cloud. What we call objects will not necessarily be physical objects. The object's emotional interface (character), not its momentary function (purpose), becomes the critical differentiator.

But however ubiquitous these objects might already be, they seem to represent a new reality with which we are not yet entirely comfortable. Why else would we visit museums to interact with objects that are already present in our everyday lives? Their very novelty allows us to objectify the object, pulling it from its context. Digital objects and art installations become tweet-size presentations on video screens or wall posters. In the MoMA exhibition, the "SMSlingshot" by VR/Urban—a highly interactive, urban-scale, guerrilla art project—is showcased as a framed wall display of a slingshot accompanied by a video recording. The substitute feels like dining off a photograph of a meal: no taste, no scent, no food, just an image. Interactivity—a new existential dimension—is not reducible. It cannot be substituted or expressed through video footage or text; it must be experienced in the first person. Curators often miss this essential quality of digital media, but so does much of our society, which continues to misinterpret activities such as gaming as purely entertaining phenomena.

Objects do talk, but we still don't fully understand what they are really telling us. In their 1995 book *The Axemaker's Gift*, James Burke and Robert Ornstein described the history of our civilization as a constant shaping of tools by people, and a consequential shaping of people and the way we think by the tools we create. This proposition is still relevant today and directly applies to the current debate about digital media. Our new relationship with objects—either physical or dematerialized, but definitely responsive and intelligent—will have a profound impact on human culture and on our place within it. ■