Chapter 15
The Process of Weeding Out:
Rhizome, Rhizomes, and Rhizomatic New Media Art Communities

Robert W. Sweeny
Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a description of the online new media art community, Rhizome, in order to study the relationship between new media artistic production, digital interaction, and online collaborative formations. The author makes use of interviews and works presented by new media artists and theorists in order to assess the structural and conceptual changes that have occurred over the lifespan of the community. Rhizome is further analyzed through the philosophical work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who outline the potential as well as the problematic possibilities found in complex network interactions. The emergent participatory moments facilitated by Rhizome, as well as the institutional blockages that challenge and confront the rhizomatic qualities of this online community structure are brought to bear in the conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1996 as an intimate email list subscribed to by some of the first artists to work online and, twelve years later, a thriving nonprofit, Rhizome has played an integral role in the history, definition and growth of art engaged with the Internet and networked technologies. Our Website is a dynamic, interactive platform, rich in historical resources and updated continually with new art and commentary by a vast community. Our programs, realized both on and offline, support art creation, presentation, preservation and interpretation; they include exhibitions & events, commissioning, daily art news and in-depth criticism, and the maintenance of a singularly comprehensive digital art archive (Rhizome, 2013)

Rhizome was founded in 1996 as an email list-serv that was established to facilitate communication and collaboration between digital artists. From these initial interactions, *Rhizome* has developed into a site that supports new artists and developing technologies, as well as serving as a repository for new media work that is often ephemeral and time-based. As stated on the site: "*Rhizome* has played an integral role in the history, definition and growth of art engaged with the Internet and networked technologies." It is important to look at the role that *Rhizome* has played in the growth and promotion of new media art as related to online communities. As I will discuss, the spread of the site has followed the general development of the Internet, from text-based communication, to visually-dense presentations, to robust social and multi-media forms of exchange.

In the process, *Rhizome* has become an exemplar for the possibilities of online community building. The growth of *Rhizome* parallels the growth of rhizomes in nature, in important ways that will be discussed further in this chapter. In order to better understand this growth, the dynamic processes displayed by natural rhizomes will now be discussed. This will be followed by a discussion of the rhizomatic as a philosophical and political diagram, at which point the discussion will return to the niche online community of *Rhizome* and the meaning that this community holds for online interaction writ large.

RHIZOMES

Rhizome, in botany, horizontal, underground plant stem capable of producing the shoot and root systems of a new plant. This capability allows the parent plant to propagate vegetatively (asexually) and also enables a plant to perennate (survive an annual unfavourable season) underground. (Encyclopaedia Brittanica Online, 2013)

Rhizomes in the form of plants have been growing for the past 280-345 million years (Bernards, Sandell, & Frasure, 2011). The Equisetum species, commonly known as Horsetail, is one of the oldest plants on Earth (Jarvis, 1999). Rhizomes are crucial for the spread of botanical life on Earth, which is one reason that they have survived through numerous epochs. As described in the previous definition, rhizomes also propagate asexually, which allows for growth that is not contingent upon the exchange of biological material such as pollen or seeds.

Rhizomes such as the Horsetail referenced above are often seen as invasive plant types. Once a rhizome takes hold within an environment, it is challenging at best to remove the species. Other varieties of rhizome, such as the Iris are planted intentionally because of their self-propagating nature, as well as their beauty. One can see from these examples that rhizomes in nature describe a wide variety of plant types, each with particular characteristics. The heartiness of the rhizome is a defining trait that sets these forms apart from other plant life.

This trait has led to specific connotations, which are not generally positive: a person can be 'crabby' like crabgrass, or can be considered a nuisance, such as a weed that needs to be removed from the carefully-maintained social lawn.[1] The resiliency of the rhizome has also led to the description of self-organizing social and political groups as 'grass-roots' organizations. These efforts are named as such based upon the internal structure of the group, which runs counter to those organized through a hierarchical, arboreal, or tree-like structure.

The 'grass roots' protest movements that culminated in the general strikes of May 1968 in France influenced a generation of social scientists. Included in this sphere of influence were philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, who would later pair to write the Anti-Oedipus series, generally considered to be one of the most influential philosophical writings

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