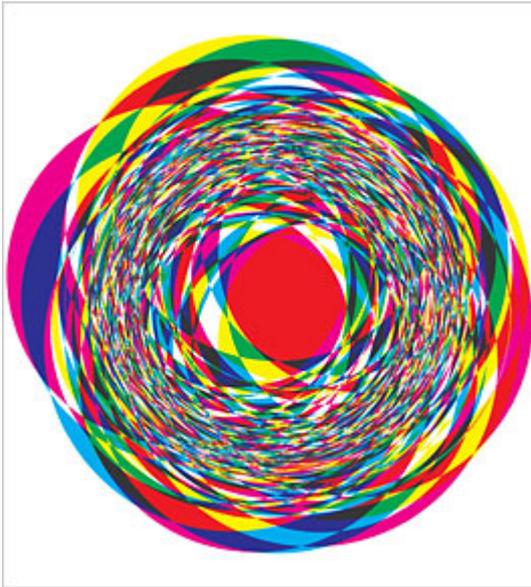


John Maeda: Rethinking technology and the digital revolution

Alice Rawsthorn



Fireball by John Maeda.

Super-buff and seemingly fearless, Officer John Maeda swoops across the island to circle around the modernist villa perched on a cliff with the sea swirling below.

The officer isn't real, nor is the island. He is the Resident, and the island is the Metaverse in the virtual world of the Second Life online game dreamed up by the real John Maeda. Looking rather less muscular than his digital namesake, he is standing beside the computer depicting his game in Riflemaker, a London art gallery. Among the other works exhibited there are an antique beige 1980 Apple II Plus computer hooked up to an iPod, and a dozen or so iPod Nanos with lovely, elusive digital images flickering across the screens.

It isn't what you'd expect to find in an art gallery, but Maeda never does the expected. "John's point of view on almost anything is different," said Nicholas Negroponte, chairman emeritus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab in the United States, where Maeda is a professor of media arts and sciences. "He's like sand in an oyster - irritating, but turning into a pearl. His commentary seems nutty at the time, but then so true not long thereafter."

Nutty or not, Maeda has had a profound effect on our lives. A boyish 40-year-old, with quick-fire speech and a puckish giggle, he has pioneered the development of digital art and design since the late 1980s, and has imbued a decade of MIT graduates with his passion for humanizing technology. "John's research is the structural foundation of design experimentation worldwide," said Paola Antonelli, curator of design at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. "What makes him extremely influential is not only his enormous aesthetic talent, but his capacity to extend a rigorous design philosophy, based on simplicity and clarity of purpose, to the most important tool of the contemporary design process, computer software."

Maeda discovered computers as a teenager in his native Seattle, after buying the Apple II Plus now at Riflemaker. His Japanese parents ran a tofu store, and all their kids worked there after school. "I had no friends because we were always working, so I bought a friend," recalled Maeda with a giggle. "There were no programs at the time and no good books on programming. You had to program yourself. I was self-taught, but in the worst way."

The first program he wrote was an accounting one for the tofu store. After high school, he studied computer programming at MIT, and became intrigued by its creative potential after discovering the work of the graphic designers, Paul Rand and Muriel Cooper, who then ran MIT's Visual Language Workshop. She encouraged Maeda to pursue his artistic interests by doing his doctorate at Tsukuba University's Institute of Art and Design in Japan.

Living in Japan in the "wired" era of the mid-1990s, he was commissioned by Sony, Seiko, Shiseido and other companies to experiment with then-emerging media like CD-ROMS and the Internet. "They were looking for people to help them figure out computers and the Web," he recalled. "It was a crazy period. I never slept, but I had this zeal about the computer as a creative medium."

In 1996, he returned to the United States to teach at MIT, where his students have included such gifted software designers as Ben Fry and Casey Reas. Maeda introduced his ideas to a wider audience through books, like 1999's "Design by Numbers," and the following year's MAEDA@MEDIA, a memoir-cum-manifesto for his belief in the creative possibilities of technology. He also wrote software that enabled designers to create fluid, emotionally expressive digital images. "It was a revolution," said Paola Antonelli. "It provided jaded designers with the liberating equivalent of a lathe to an industrial designer." Maeda demonstrated its potential in exhibitions of luscious computer-generated imagery, like the interactive project, Reactive Books, that is now displayed at MoMA as part of its collection.

In an era when the boundaries between art and design are fiercely debated, Maeda seems to glide between them, as though his passion for technology empowers him to circumvent conventional definitions. The same passion also appears to enable him to create uncompromisingly lovely images, at a time when both artists and designers tend to shy away from pure beauty.

Yet his love affair with technology has cooled. Maeda says he believes that it has become bogged down by corporate concerns and befuddingly complex, and he has devoted the last few years to trying to address those problems by studying for an MBA and creating a new Physical Language Workshop at MIT to coordinate research into Simplicity, which he sees as essential to the future of business and technology. "People are fed up with over-complication," he said. "I can see why the marketing guys want something that does five things not one, but why are cellphones so complicated that you can't make a call?"

The research culminated in the publication last fall of "The Laws of Simplicity," which is Maeda's best-selling book so far. He is now planning to refocus the MIT Media Lab again, and to write a book on research innovation as well as to study law, in the hope of demystifying another obstacle to creativity. "Perhaps this is the start of the digital equivalent of the Arts and Crafts Movement or, perhaps, more like the Bauhaus in rethinking design," said Bill Moggridge, co-founder of the IDEO design group. "One wonders if he will lead us to something equivalently inspirational for the information revolution."

Whatever the outcome, Maeda doesn't envisage standing still. "Even now I'm not sure what a great Web designer is, because the medium keeps changing; every few months we have a new standard, a new upgrade," he said. "Keeping up is impossible. It's like being a virtuoso violinist when the violin hasn't been defined. People claim virtuosity, but I don't think it's possible. And that's good if you think about it, because once there's virtuosity, it's done."

The "Maeda: MySpace" exhibition runs through June at Rifleman, 79 Beak Street, London W1. www.rifleman.org

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