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Handling New Media
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Assignment #1

**Interpreting the New Language:
Comparing and Contrasting Old and New Media (Audio Works)**

Words and sound collages are just a couple elements that unite two interactive audio artworks—one using “old” media and the other using “new” media. In both works, words are used to access sounds that can be combined to make these audio collages or layers. The interaction between the user/audience and the media work is when the user chooses these words or phrases. Yet, while these works seem similar in concept, the different media creates two very different pieces.

The “old” media work is Alan Berliner’s sound sculpture, *Audiofile*. It consists of four metal file cabinets with every drawer containing an audiocassette player. When a drawer is opened, an electronic device activates the cassette recorder, which plays a unique sound on a loop. Of the 108 audio “files,” the sounds range from a “chorus of frogs” to rap music to “smoker’s cough.” The user can pull out any combination of drawers to create a harmonious or disharmonious arrangement of sounds, which, Berliner argues, “form the potential for an inexhaustible variety of narrative, abstract, musical and philosophical auditory experiences”. The old media that this installation utilizes is the analog audiotape that is played from the activation of an electrical device.

On the other hand, Jason Freeman uses new media mp3 files and peer-to-peer technology for his interactive work, *N.A.G.*, or *Network Auralization for Gnutella*.

Gnutella is a peer-to-peer file-sharing network that is widely used by such websites as Napster. In Freeman's work, the user types search keywords into the *N.A.G.* software, which then downloads mp3 files that match the keywords and "remixes these audio files in real time based on the structure of the Gnutella network itself". The result is a "chaotic musical collage," as Freeman puts it. Therefore, Berliner and Freeman's work are interactive in a similar way—choosing words to access audio elements. Because of this, we might not think of interactivity being unique to new media. A few of David Ross's "21 Distinctive Qualities of Net.Art" refer, in some degree, to the "back-and-forth continuum quality of the net". Yet, I would argue that there is a certain amount of interactivity in Berliner's old media installation.

So, while both these works share very similar concepts and interactive techniques, we must look beneath the surface to see where they greatly differ. By examining Lev Manovich's distinctive characteristics for old and new media, we begin to see the key differences and how they affect the experience of the work as a whole. Aside from the main, and obvious, differences such as information in *N.A.G.* being digital and therefore a numeric representation, there are major differences in automation and variability as Manovich describes in *The Language of New Media*. In *N.A.G.*, the software automatically creates the "musical collage" based on the keywords criteria. Meanwhile, the user of Berliner's *Audiophile* must manually pull out the drawers to activate the cassette players. Also, the audio layering in *Audiophile* has—despite varying duration and sound choices—has an finite number of combinations made up of 108 sounds, to be exact. However, imagine typing in the word "love" into Freeman's *N.A.G.* and think of how

many song titles would come up, not to mention any spoken word files. As Manovich argues, new media are characterized by variability, and works can be altered to create “potentially infinite versions.”

David Ross also points out certain characteristics of new media that may also be true in contrasting these two works. Among Ross’s 21 “qualities,” Ross argues that the “Authority shifts between reader and writer. In this case, Berliner and Freeman are the writers of these works. If we consider how the reader interacts with these works—by choosing words—I would argue that Berliner holds more authority over his piece because it is his words that the reader chooses. In Freeman’s work, however, the reader is free to choose whatever word he or she types into the searching software. Freeman, nor Freeman’s software, can force the reader to choose from a standard set of words. In this case, the authority “shifts” to the reader.

We begin to see some of the key differences between these different media pieces. In the case of these two works, interactivity is not necessarily a unique characteristic of new media. The experience of that interactivity is, however, affected by the digital, new media, framework. The fundamental distinctions, therefore, set these two works widely apart from each other, despite their superficial similarities.