

Serial Consign

Digital Culture & Information Design

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BURAK ARIKAN INTERVIEW

Submitted by Greg J. Smith on Wed, 2008-02-06 01:19

Last summer, Cati Vaucelle at Architectradure [tipped me off](#) about [Meta-Markets](#), a project which created a means to buy and sell units of social media. I penned an [enthusiastic review](#) of the project in the fall and continue to be engaged by this ongoing thought-experiment. *Meta-Markets* was authored by [Burak Arikan](#), a graduate of the [MIT Media Lab](#) who is currently based in Brooklyn. This Friday, Burak will be taking part in a panel discussion entitled *Real World Implications of Virtual Economies* at the Turbulence [Mixed Realities](#) Exhibition and Symposium in Boston (and [streaming live](#) in Second Life).

Burak's work touches on a number of the topics discussed here on Serial Consign, and he and I have spent the last few weeks firing emails back and forth that delve into economies of exchange, data portability, information visualization and how these themes are explored through his projects.

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Greg J. Smith: Ever since your 2006 [A Stock Market in Life](#) project you've exhibited a fascination with incorporating the (data)aesthetics and interface of commodity exchange in a large portion of your work. You were one of the architects of [OPENSTUDIO](#) and also launched *Meta-Markets* last year. Both of these projects deal with trading and speculating on creative goods in quite distinct contexts. I stumbled across the word [artonomics](#) on the OPENSTUDIO site - could you discuss this term in relation to your ongoing project of creating platforms for economic simulation?

Burak Arikan: We made up the term "artonomics" to define the axes of arts, economics, and the participatory social web. In the [PLW](#) (Physical Language Workshop at the MIT Media Lab) we focused on building networked infrastructures for creative people, so that they can get economically more powerful and eventually affect politics. In OPENSTUDIO an artwork is a digital drawing. By the time a drawing is completed, it is in the market for sale. From your studio to the market there is no distance. When you buy a piece, you own a share in that person's body of work. OPENSTUDIO members experience semi-ownership of creative capital. Well this type of living is the promised future right, what if you experience it now, future not only becomes more visible, but also actionable and debatable.

I am particularly interested in collectivity in creative work, which brings in techno-social protocols and economic models for self-organization of large groups of people. In such economic models money represents information. You buy things not because you need it but you show interest in it. In the end, I don't necessarily consider this type of work as economic simulation or computer simulation, because participants spend real time and energy (aka micro-labor) within these systems. They draw, they click here and there, they decide on things, write comments, tag, mix, edit, vote, recommend etc. These are real relationships woven through experimental and modifiable protocols that organize network of social relationships and economic transactions.



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I think today what we see on the social web is that the definition of creative work is changing. Is it an image, a movie, a sculpture, an installation, a process, a response? In this networked world, it is more clear to me that the substance of one's creative work is not only a material, a recipe, or a code library, but it is also materialized information flowing in multiple layers of networks which are modulated by market forces, power relationships, past events, and future predictions.



[[Meta-Markets performance](#) & [entity info](#) for a bookmark of [Grand Text Auto](#)]

[Meta-Markets](#) is essentially an exchange for social networking entities. In this simulation, social media like [del.icio.us](#) bookmarks or [Feedburner](#) syndication subscriber counts take on a life of their own and a community of speculators collectively determine the value of this data. I think one of the most interesting things about this project is that it creates a sort-of double presence for these services where users can determine the worth of individual articles of social media that stands outside of the [generic web 2.0 chatter](#) about valuation and venture capital. How do you see [Meta-Markets](#) in relation to the actual web economy?

The current web economy is not open enough. With [Meta-Markets](#) we aim to raise the bar of openness for existing social web services. I don't mean the locked in data in Facebook or similar web services. I support efforts like [DataPortability](#), these are very important steps to release our data from centralized databases. For us the problem is that the value of our labor is not open in the current web economy. In other words, what we get for our online work is not clear for us while it is clear for the service providers. This problem has been emerging because of the blurred boundaries between work and play, because information is no less real than physical matter, because information is commodity, because of the changing roles of consumers and producers, the [prosumer phenomenon](#) as discussed elsewhere. The solution is to have more transparent services, so that both the users and the service providers equally know the value of the work put in the services. Of course this is a complex task, that's why we approach it collectively by creating a stock market for socially networked creative work.



[Burak Arikan / [Terms & Conditions](#) / 2007]

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READING LIST

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- Everyware: The Dawning Age of Ubiquitous Computing
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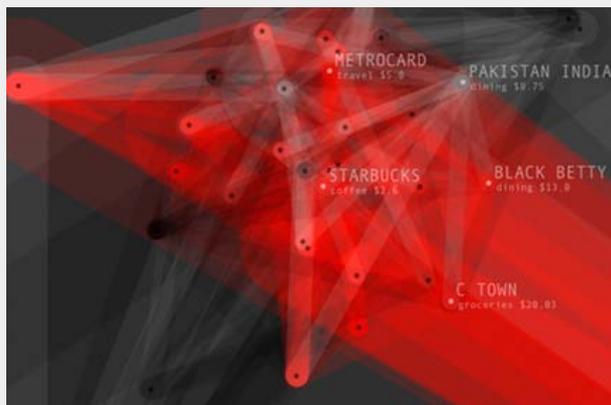
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You posted an [excellent commentary](#) on the economics of Facebook which broadly outlined the disconnect between the bottom-up “social” investment by users and the top-down scramble by management to implement an efficient contextual advertising engine. You quite concisely identified the paradox as follows:

I work for Facebook everyday but I am not getting paid. In their recent Social Ads announcement Facebook says “It is an ad-supported service. It is a free service.” Pause. Did we sign a contract? How do you measure my labor and serve accordingly? I don’t know how you measure the value of my informational content, the value of my informational content uploaded by my friends to your server, the value of my relationships, the value of my activities...

Google’s [OpenSocial](#) begins to address the ownership that users are entitled to over their information and social connectivity. How do you see OpenSocial influencing the direction of *Meta-Markets*?

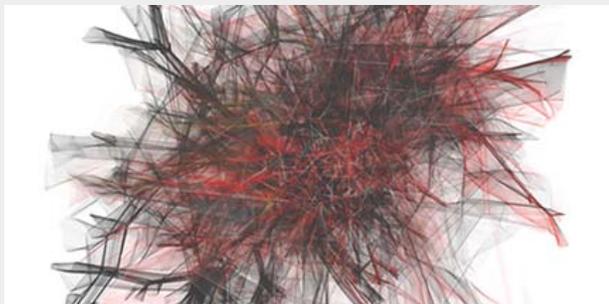
OpenSocial is hyper-modern politics, so is any other network protocol. Today defining standards and lobbying for the industry to adopt a standard are common political practices of the networked world we all live in. If standardization can happen by the participation of many voices, it becomes more democratic. Although I support current efforts to unlock the centralized databases, I don’t believe it is enough. The benefits of open communication standards are always publicly discussed from the point of view of the user or the developer, but who *really* benefits are the service providers. When you move your data anywhere, yes the user has the data anywhere, yes the developer builds write-once-works-with-any-other services, but the service provider is also happy because they have free context and free trust networks, which are generated by users’ labor in other places and carried to this service. We may call this distributed free labor. Data portability without ethics is the multiplication of the exploitation of micro-labor. When we use a service, the value generated by our action should be clear and open for all the involving parties. This is not easy, it involves political and economical struggles, but with the *Meta-Markets* community I believe we can make progress in this endeavor.



This conversation about transparency and data portability is very interesting given your recent [MYPOCKET](#) project for [Turbulence](#) (pictured above). In this work, you’ve developed an algorithm to predict future purchases based off the analysis of an archive of receipts. Credit card companies employ similar algorithms to flag sudden shifts in spending habits so that potential credit card fraud can be prevented. I guess it is safe to assume you’re not doing R&D for Citibank so what exactly are your goals with *MYPOCKET*?

Spending habits are not only for prevention of frauds, but also for modulation of living. With *MYPOCKET* I see what my spending behavior is, this is probably what a financial analyst sees. I share it with general public to raise awareness and to make closed-door-analysis of our spending behavior debatable.

MYPOCKET is also an exploration of the bidirectional adaptation between human and software. Between my behavior and the prediction process there is a feedback loop. Both negative and positive feedback. Positive feedback happens through confirmation of a prediction, which increases weight of that category / item in the database. Negative feedback happens through certain transactions, which have rules. For example a \$40 ATM cash withdrawal means that I will not need cash for 4 days, approximately every \$10 cash = 1 day, or a \$70 metrocard spending (monthly unlimited ride for the NYC subway) means I will not buy a metrocard for another 30 days. These rules, some obvious some specific to me, are added as negative feedbacks in the loop. Over time the software will make smarter predictions about my spending behavior. Sometimes I verify the predictions, sometimes I don't mind, sometimes I am not conscious, sometimes the predictions determine my future choices, creating a system in which both myself and the software adapt to one another.



[Burak Arikan / *Tense* / 2007]

All of my questions have approached you as some kind of artist-economist – that is not entirely fair as it is clear you are interested in addressing other issues with your work. You obviously have an interest in the aesthetics of information, networks and connectivity. This is evident in the projects discussed thus far, but many of your other works (i.e. [Meta-Control](#), [Tense](#), [Arb](#), etc.) Could you discuss your approach to visualization?

My interest in geometry ties my seemingly separate practices. Geometry provides instruments not only for organizing space but also for understanding concepts in political philosophy. I started creating dynamic visual compositions in 2002. Since then I work directly with the code, write processes that modulate the geometry and the kinetics, explore the micro relationships, observe the macro behavior, tune, play, contract, scale, stare, change, iterate. My early dynamic compositions are repurposed as performative artifacts in *Meta-Control*. *Arb* and *Tense* are the same processes, an exploration of growth in networks. From few to many, from simple to complex, from instant contractions to subtle settlements, while the network is being built, nodes push and pull each other, connections paint the color of the forces.

I create systems, they are not visual, visualizations are the visual manifestations of an instance of a system. My *OPENSTUDIO* visualizations show relationships built in the *OPENSTUDIO* economy, *Micro Fashion Network* visualization shows relationships of colors based on how I generate the data. Rather than creating visualizations based on other systems' data, I prefer to create the system on my own or through collaborations. Like *Meta-Markets* and *OPENSTUDIO*, these systems can be living processes which involve many people's time, energy, and intellect. Manifestations can also be in physical or in other forms. *MYPOCKET* is a living digital/physical process, which is manifested in three core forms for information: a list, a graph, and an object.

More recently I understand that the systems I create are vectors, vectors as [McKenzie Wark](#), or [Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker](#) use the term. A vector is a medium in which information moves. I hope and work for more people to create such liberated systems.

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