

Close Reading the Social: What Interface Analysis Is and Yet Can Be

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Over the last decade, interfaces have become important objects of study for scholars from a range of disciplines, including media studies, game studies, software studies, technology studies, and history of the book. What has not yet become clear is how interfaces *should* be studied and what in fact might be meant by the term *interface analysis*. As a methodological label, interface analysis sounds rigorous, it sounds cutting-edge, but it also sounds deceptively obvious: if I am studying an interface for any reason, aren't I performing interface analysis?

Much of the confusion comes, I think, from the fact that interface analysis currently describes two very different kinds of research, one of which has been traditionally associated with the social sciences, the other with the humanities. In the former, the object has tended to be what we might loosely call the Social: how interfaces are used by human beings. Some of this research focuses on interfaces as communicative spaces, and thus takes as its object multiplayer games, online platforms or services, and what we once called computer-mediated communication tools. Other studies, some of them undertaken by psychology-based researchers, examine how individual subjects interact—both cognitively and kinesthetically—not with each other, but with or through the interface itself. Generally, then, this research involves human subjects in empirical investigations of how human beings behave in relation to specific forms of software or technology.

The other branch of interface analysis, by contrast, treats the interface as a text. Instead of studying what human beings do in or through the interface, this branch examines how the interface itself creates meaning and/or feeling via its formal features and, sometimes, its content. As in “traditional” literary or film studies, the primary analytical tool is close reading, though historical/archival research and contextualization may also be employed. Much of this research has as its object interfaces that more readily resemble the Modernist conception of text: discrete, neat works such as digital art installations, hyper-text literature, single-player or static online games, and office or productivity software.

Both of these modes of study have their benefits, and both have their problems. Unlike the social approach, the text-based approach does not require complicated, expensive, and time-consuming research design and approval (from IRB, for example) to get started and thus provides more flexibility for capturing a rapidly changing subject. On the other hand, the results of the text-based approach are often disappointingly narrow in purview or limited in application, in large part because of the smaller and/or idiosyncratic interfaces chosen. If we agree with theorist Branden Hookway that interfaces manifest as the interplay between technology and human behavior, then both approaches also risk mistaking their object of study by attending too closely to only one side of the relationship.

In the space remaining to me here, I'd like to suggest a way to reconcile these two approaches by reframing the relationship, at least as it applies to the study of interfaces, between hermeneutics and sociology. To do this, I want to turn briefly to Lawrence Lessig's *Code*, which, though not about the interface *per se*, models a way of reading online spaces that has much to offer interface analysis. Lessig's concern is human behavior, but, as a legal scholar, he is less interested in the creative possibility of this behavior than he is in how such possibility is restrained and predetermined by different forms of regulation. Key for us here is the form of regulation he calls code or architecture, which is the literal programming of a space that determines what can and cannot be "physically" done. In Twitter, for example, one simply cannot post a Tweet of more than 140 characters, just as, in our physical reality, one cannot walk through a wall. One can, of course, push against code, and sometimes even break it, but the majority of the time code functions as "intended" to regulate behavior within its proper domain. What is more, code serves or fosters specific sets of values so that, in the act of regulating behavior, it is likewise producing (or trying to produce) specific kinds of subjects. Twitter's character limit, we might say, serves the ideal of open public discourse; our inability to walk through walls serves the institution of property.

Lessig's concept of code, I contend, thus offers interface analysts a way of studying the Social by treating the interface as text. Here, though, close reading would be geared toward regulation: What is possible and impossible within or through an interface? What behaviors are encouraged or discouraged? And, lest this seem like studying an empty house or a game with no players, how have real users left textual traces upon the interface—and what do these traces tell us about its regulator design? Such analysis has the benefit of being more easily applied and effected than traditional social science methods while yet preserving the research object (broadly considered) such methods pursue. This mode of interface analysis might also serve, at least within digital media/culture studies, to help retard or reverse the drifting apart of social science and humanities work by offering a model of interdisciplinarity that takes place at the level of method and not simply subject matter.