

Into the Megadungeon: An Introduction

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1 A Model for Digital Complexity

The digital is increasingly complex: not merely a parsable sequence of zeros and ones, but a layered, fragmented sprawl of interconnected and interdependent assemblages. In the words of Matthew Fuller: “Complex objects such as media systems [...] have become informational as much as physical, but without losing any of their fundamental materiality” (2005, 1).

This complexity poses a constant challenge to the representational schemas through which fields like the Digital Humanities and media art make sense of the digital and its sociocultural implications. Concepts like virtuality, multidimensionality and datafication affect a strong pull towards disembodied, abstracted imaginaries of the digital. At the same time, media theorists consistently argue for the renewed usefulness of spatial thinking, using architectural, navigational or topographical metaphors to map out the contours of emerging digital assemblages. Building on the ‘spatial turn’ proposed by post-modern geographers in the second half of the twentieth century (Harvey 1989; Soja 1989; Thrift 2008), several authors have conceptualized an increasingly layered, multidimensional and networked digital

ecosystem in terms of volumetric space (Kitchin, Doge 2011), geological depth (Parikka 2015), or computational infrastructure (Bratton 2015). This special issue follows in the footsteps of these proposals and outlines a new model capable of encompassing the complexity of contemporary digital ecosystems: the ‘megadungeon’. The articles included in this collection approach the megadungeon model from different angles and scales, contributing to an exploratory, speculative, and necessarily partial mapping of this media theoretical framework.

The megadungeon concept originates from role-playing games as an expanded version of the dungeon, a maze-like, subterranean geographical space for adventuring that has been cemented as a spatial trope in games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and countless other ludic narratives across media. While dungeons are usually limited to a few levels of rooms and corridors that are comprehensively mapped by the game master or designer and explored by players as part of their adventures, megadungeons develop at much larger scales. A megadungeon is usually the main setting for a whole adventure, functioning as a game world of its own: it unfolds over a large number (at times potentially infinite) levels, it sustains enclosed ecosystems and complex societal dynamics involving playing and non-playing characters, and it is not meant to be explored and mapped in its entirety. Given their scale, megadungeons are often procedurally generated as the game progresses through random tables, variable parameters or more complex algorithmic calculations, and players can spend months or even years delving into their depths. Despite the term’s origins in Gothic and fantasy literature, its conceptual architecture of intricate, multilayered structures stacked on top of (or nested within) one another does offer several productive correlations with contemporary digital ecosystems.

This special issue argues that the megadungeon can be conceptualized as a model of the digital in at least four key aspects. First, the infrastructural entanglement of the megadungeon’s spatial layout of halls, rooms, caverns, tunnels, conduits, pits, shafts, etc. maps onto various metaphors of media communication based on channels, pipelines, networks and stacks. Second, as a geographical feature massive enough to sustain a living ecosystem of its own, the megadungeon echoes with the planetary scale of Mumford’s megatechnics or Bratton’s accidental megastructure. Third, the parametric or algorithmic logics through which megadungeons are procedurally generated resemble features of contemporary digital media systems such as social graphs, personalized feeds, curated experiences, and even synthetic content. Fourth, as a context dominated by a ludic paradigm (Huizinga 1949), the megadungeon prefigures a gamification of everyday life that goes beyond the domain of videogames and encompasses most contemporary forms of digital mediation. These four aspects allow us to conceptualize the megadungeon beyond its ori-

gins in fantasy role-playing games as a spatially deterritorialized and parametrically generated megastructure characterized by emergent complexity and layered expansion. The proposal we advance is the following: the megadungeon can serve as a productive model for the intricacies of digital mediation.

2 A Metaphor for the Database, Archive, and Museum

The megadungeon model bears a certain resemblance to the multilayered field of the Digital Humanities. While the former privileges vertical sprawl and nested structures, the latter expands mostly horizontally and arboreally, encompassing a forest of ramifications. The megadungeon's parametric endlessness and the impossibility to fully enclose its volumes and map its geographies resonates with the difficulty of successfully following a single path in the multitude of "non-definitions" that characterize the macro-field of Digital Humanities (Thompson Klein 2015). The blurring of the boundaries between various domains of humanistic knowledge is profoundly connected to the digital, which enables the creation of interdisciplinary networks and methodological approaches between fields like literature, history, archaeology, social culture and art, just as it affords the profound transmediality that characterizes the megadungeon. The Digital Humanities field is today

much broader than it once was and includes not only the computational modeling and analysis of humanities information, but also the cultural study of digital technologies, their creative possibilities, and their social impact. (Schreibman et al. 2016, XVIII)

Being brought into academic debate from popular culture, the megadungeon also reinforces the broader outlook of the public humanities towards the social and cultural effects of technology.

As Paolo Berti's contribution notes, by following Lev Manovich's reading of Panofsky, the database is the symbolic form of the computer era (Manovich 1999), and a procedural affinity links the megadungeon model to the electronic, metalinguistic, or standardized formats of archives, collections of documents and works of art. This link between the megadungeon model and the Digital Humanities, as well as to the public humanities, is strengthened by the logics of playfulness and interaction, through which these two domains find greater consonance and overlap (Burdick et al. 2012).

The need to organize and store knowledge in formalized and interoperable structures also requires new ways of visualizing knowledge, including 3D simulations, image clusters and AI-generated media, which are governed by data but subordinated to user interaction.

Thus, the ludic dimension of the megadungeon relates with experiences common to both video game players and users exploring virtual museum collections. This visionary museum that Johanna Drucker tries to imagine with skeptical curiosity leads her to question whether this ecosystem could really be “the most formidable resource for art history and cultural memory production ever conceived” (Drucker 2019, 2.14), or if the most likely outcome would be disappointment.

The concept of ‘digital depth’ proposed by Gabriele de Seta’s contribution to this special issue maps closely onto the levels of depth through which the museum’s accessibility is layered, suggesting a way of rethinking collections and making them open to all possible participants: scholars, practitioners, technicians, amateurs, artists, curious visitors and flâneurs. The list of nine main characteristics of the megadungeon identified by Asa Roast’s article also reflects features of the digital museum such as the absence of borders, the ecological specificity of collections, and the dynamism of its dwellers, who evolve and adapt their perception and experience according to the curators’ strategies.

More generally, digital databases, archives and museums are not linear environments, but each of their rooms, corridors, and connections intersect paths where different periods, collections and materials converge, offering several ways of moving through their spaces, following a diachronic or synchronic temporal sequence. At the same time, they share the risk of boredom, of the incomprehensibility of the knowledge they propose to convey, and of the abundance of multimedia elements that distract from the observation of any specific cultural object. The more we delve into collections like digital databases, archives and museums, the greater the complexity and detail of the resources they offer, so that in the end their exploration itself becomes one of the central objectives of the visit - but perhaps not the only one, depending on what the experience design suggests. Finally, the concept of the digital museum, like that of the megadungeon, remains more of a legendary idea than a fully conceived one. It is rooted in the history of art and culture and lives through metamorphosis and speculation. The megadungeon can indeed be, as Carolina Fernández-Castrillo’s proposal suggests, “a cartographic metaphor of our daily ramblings as postdigital flâneurs” into the entries of an online database, inside a virtual museum, or along the shelves of a digital archive, equipped with the same curiosity of delving into a dungeon of fantasy and without the need to find only one possible exit.

3 Delving into the Megadungeon

The symposium *Megadungeon: New Digital Volumetries in Art and Media* (Venice, October 4, 2022) was an important first step to conceptualize the megadungeon and, in the tradition of role-playing games, gather a well-rounded adventuring party of contributors for a special issue of the *magazén* journal. The seven articles featured in this special issue all respond to our invitation to speculate on the megadungeon as a metaphor, framework or model for the digital that is capable of capturing its complexity and thereby open up new perspectives on digital media practices, technologies, and aesthetics. The special issue is organized in two complementary halves: a more theoretical one composed of three articles that sketch the contours of the megadungeon, and a more case-study oriented one consisting of four articles that zoom into specific aspects of this new digital volumetry.

Asa Roast's contribution opens the special issue with a historical discussion of the dungeon as an imaginary, interconnected underground space that, through the mediation of fantasy narratives and role-playing games, has evolved into both a project for spatial organization and a practice of play. Through a Lefebvian interpretation of the megadungeon as a procedurally-generated, potentially infinite extension of the dungeon, Roast articulates this as a metaphor for new configurations of urban and digital ecosystems. Along parallel lines, Paolo Berti describes the megadungeon as an anti-navigational and generative model that captures the interconnected and multi-layered nature of the digital media landscape. Connecting the megadungeon to technological transformations, Berti discusses how this vertical model mobilizes connections to the spatial and temporal grammar of the underground as a nonlinear, deep site of unpredictability that has influenced fields ranging from media theory to arts. Gabriele de Seta expands this model into the digital realm by questioning the metaphors of surface and flatness that characterize common imaginaries of communication and computation. By investigating the concept of 'digital depth' from early ludic narratives and cyberspace rhetoric's to the deep web and machine learning, this volumetric speculation foregrounds depth as an underlying feature of digitally mediatized societies.

Building on this theoretical framework, Nicolas Nova revisits the monster manual format of role-playing games to describe the 'digital menagerie' of entities and creatures inhabiting the complex media ecosystems that are accessed through computers, smartphones and gaming devices. By mapping out a variety of digitally-native beings, Nova seeks to offer a guide for coexistence with the megadungeon's emerging ecosystems. In a similar spirit, Luigi Monteanni identifies the viral expression 'goblin mode' as a political aesthetic

with clear socioeconomic contours, connecting it to the shared experiences of underground musicians operating in global urban settings and demonstrating how these artists use their informal practices to respond to marginalization by tapping into the layered spaces of the internet. Rebekah Rhodes explores the enduring influence of Hieronymus Bosch's masterpiece *The Garden of Earthly Delights* on digital and new media art through the work of artists such as Miao Xiaochun, Michael Bielicky, and Kamila B. Richter, illustrating how the triptych's multi-layered structure, bursting with countless narrative vignettes and imaginative events, demonstrates its power to create worlds. For Carolina Fernandez-Castrillo, the procedurally-generated nature of the megadungeon underpins the human-machine collaboration of Web 3.0. She revisits Walter Benjamin's ideas in the context of digital media, using Mario Klingemann's Botto Project as a case study to investigate digital art production and the creation of alternative markets through participatory dynamics.

In this special issue, we share the findings of seven exploratory forays into this emergent model of digital complexity. Spanning disciplines and methodologies, all contributors have approached the megadungeon from different perspectives, finding original entry points and charting innovative ways of understanding the digital. We hope that this is only a beginning, and that other researchers will find the megadungeon to be a productive and useful model for their own inquiries. Theoretical frameworks and conceptual models are increasingly important tools to orient studies of the digital, as they can not only guide research questions and theory-building but also help scholars navigate ecosystems of new creative practices and material resources. More broadly, the megadungeon could also stimulate further debate on the spatial imaginaries of the digital by recognizing that bottom-up experiences are as important as the top-down efforts to understand new media. As a model characterized by procedural logics, emergent complexity and layered expansion, the megadungeon has no fixed entry point nor clearly defined boundaries; no external point of view can encompass it, no map can fully represent it - the only way to explore it is through partial, playful engagement with its vertiginous, multidimensional, phantasmagoric depths.

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