

MELT

Unstable Computing

Shintaro Miyazaki: So how would you describe or define unstable computing?

MELT: Unstable computing is about welcoming the ways in which computing is already unstable, and to flow with and make space within computing practices that challenge supposedly stable hegemonic operations. Computing is literally unstable: your computer's memory is refreshed in the range of milliseconds and as we write this text on a pad hosted by a feminist collective, both the internet connection on the train and the server can crash anytime. Unstable computing welcomes these unruly interruptions and makes openings for epistemological glitches by retelling the story of who did (not) shape computing histories and presents—from the “little old ladies” who weaved the “LOL” memory used in rockets to the hacks by disabled people described in the *Crip Technoscience Manifesto*. Following a DIWO (do it with others) approach, unstable computing happens when you meet your friends to learn how to code a queer game or run a server. It's also when you ask your friends on Signal for a book you want to read instead of ordering it on Amazon. Unstable computing's clock works on crip time (bending clocks to meet disabled people rather than meeting turbo-capitalist's super-speed clock) and is in touch with the trans*cestors (understanding that familial and friendship-based timelines are as long and deep as other accounts of family). It accounts for the effects of computing on the Earth's climate (tracing material realities and unfolding how colonial extraction continues to fuel computational infrastructure and production at all levels).

Shintaro Miyazaki: I really like your description of the unstable infrastructure in computing. How does this relate to the *Crip Technoscience Manifesto* you mentioned? It sounds highly relevant!

MELT: *The Crip Technoscience Manifesto* by Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch affirms disabled people as designers and hackers of everyday (often inaccessible) life. In the '70s, disabled people and their accomplices in the U.S. took sledgehammers to the streets in order to create curb cuts, literally reshaping one of the materials that is considered most stable: concrete. In this sense, we understand *Crip Technoscience* as invested in an instability that allows for a reshaping and remaking of inaccessible infrastructures. In a website artwork of ours called *Hacking Concrete* we take up concrete as a material and as a metaphor, and we use text, alt text, videos, video descriptions, links, and nested pages to tell stories that shift the assumed stability of

concrete and thus presumably stable conditions (<http://meltionary.com/meltries/c.html>). When crip science, a concept by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, meets unstable computing it can take the shape of writing captions or translations for a friend because the organizers of an online event have not cared to do that, writing alt texts on Twitter for images that other people share so that disabled people who use screen readers can enjoy them too, using software to display pronouns, or programming your own access tools.

Shintaro Miyazaki: How do you work with unstable computing?

MELT: In our work as MELT, we have worked on unstable computing in a meltry (a melted entry in our project Meltionary) called "Etching Towards Non Binary Computing" (<http://meltionary.com/meltries/p.html>). Cosmic rays are high-energy (often hydrogen) atomic nuclei, and they escape the systems of collapsing supernova stars and speed through space at the speed of light. Entering the atmosphere of Earth, cosmic rays interfere with the binary state of bits and thus mess with memory and processing. From this, we assumed that the universe is not okay with binary logic (and other oppressive forces) and etched Printed Circuit Boards that account for other phenomena such as Non Binary Trees. Another work of ours dealing with computing and instability was the workshop Computing Instability: Notational States of Matter in H2O at Humboldt University in July 2021 for which we worked with the chemical element H2O through a series of writing exercises and followed computing through frozen, liquid, vapor states and transitions.

Shintaro Miyazaki: How is unstable computing different from, let's say, supercomputing or feminist computing?

MELT: Supercomputing is called *super* because of high-performance levels of efficiency, optimization, and near-elimination of wait times. Supercomputers hardly ever return a question with the answer, "I need to think about it. I need a bit more time... Could you ask me later?" And feminist computing, called *feminist* because of commitments to inclusion, diversity, and gender-based inclusion within computing, operates—for example—with concerns of de-biasing computational artifacts like algorithms.

In contrast to these two approaches, unstable computing works towards the maintenance of change and instability and holds open chances for non-separability of theory and practice (though it's important to mention we are indebted to the work of feminist computing, particularly trans*feminist computing + Black feminist computing). Utterances around more thinking, time, and space for consideration are expected and welcomed. We follow an unfolding of digital-material processes that include spaces for digital-scale shifts (cosmic to bit-sized), digital-expertise shifts (learning how to set up an SSH Key with a patient

friend) and digital-access shifts (like coding an email server to create more caring access for disabled people, as in our project ACCESS SERVER).¹ In these examples, unstable computing brings together community practice alongside technical practice as a way to unmake hierarchy within computing and create space for computing practices that give agency to those technical practitioners who are beginning now, or soon, or will begin later but are curious about where to start.

Shintaro Miyazaki: Where do you situate “countering” in unstable computing? How would you situate unstable computing within countering and how would you imagine its role?

MELT: “Unstable computing,” as in “countering illusions of stability.” “Countering,” as in “en(count)ering computing as an accelerator for climate change and imagining it differently.” “Unstable computing| as in “counting a different way of gaming the system,” like with holograms that become differently perceptible depending on the angle they are encountered from.

Countering within unstable computing becomes a conceptual and practical vehicle towards unmaking accumulation, productivity, and capitalisms as the primary way of valuing what computing is. Unstable computing counters investments towards dominant norms and instead invests in networks that envision a mode of computing within which more people feel like they can take up space and remake with agency.

A footnote to this thought is considering how countering proposes something of the ‘other side’ setting, computing up within a dialectical mode, which unstable computing would not do—unstable computing proposes metaphors around spectrums, scales, processes, in-betweenesses, and movements and unmakes a fixed-ness or final answer.

Shintaro Miyazaki: Would you please suggest further counter-Ns or N-computing(s) or N-futuring(s)?

MELT: Holographic Computing; Never-Computing; Disabled & Trans* Computational Futures

1 <https://research-development.hetnieuweinstituut.nl/en/het-nieuwe-instituuts-call-fellows-2021-jury-report>

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This publication is part of COUNTER-N, an online journal edited by Özgün Eylül İşcen and Shintaro Miyazaki. It is published electronically on the edoc-server of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/>

Title: Unstable Computing

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Editors: Özgün Eylül İşcen, Shintaro Miyazaki

Graphic Design: Ahmet M. Öğüt

Published in 2022 by counter-n.net

DOI: doi.org/10.18452/24463

Final Submission: December 16, 2021

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