

THEME 02

# The elemental evolution of media

DIGITAL MEDIA

MEDIA

VIRTUAL WORLDS

Our habitat is formed by the elements of earth, water, fire and air, whose vital importance turned them into religious symbols millennia ago. Although gods of fire and water are no longer worshipped, the symbolic meaning of the elements can still help us understand our habitat. Now that we're creating a "virtual habitat", the elements can teach us how digital media are likely to evolve.

## Our observations

- In the book *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, John Durham Peters, following thinkers such as Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler, argues that nature and media are one and the same. He notes that we have grown accustomed to a one-dimensional understanding of media: although we tend to think of media as "mass media" (e.g. TV, newspapers, radio), up until the 19th century, "media" referred to the elements of earth, water, fire and air. We can still learn from the symbolism of the elements to gain a deeper understanding of media (and the human condition more generally).
- Digital media are increasingly connected to a wider range of human senses (e.g. [speech, sight, touch](#)). As a result, society is being transformed in different ways. For example, the dominance of visual technology has led to "[ocular democracy](#)" and created demand for audio-based entertainment or "oral culture" (e.g. podcasts, voice assistants, [audio games](#)).
- Spending time in [virtual worlds](#) (or using digital media in general) leads to something we call "offline-online incongruence". It is the discomfort that results from "switching" between two worlds: a physical world and a virtual world. Innovation in [AR](#), which brings both worlds together, responds to offline-online incongruence.
- Digital media have established a new type of cultural pioneer, which we call [new media navigators](#), ranging from the new navigators of pop culture to digital influencers.
- Digital media evolve against a [cosmotechnical](#) background (i.e. different conceptions of technology across cultures). For example, Chinese platforms such as [Bilibili](#) and [TikTok](#) are governed by Chinese ideals.
- Digital media are increasingly designed to create [hyper-experiences](#) that trigger a loss of self and time (e.g. immersive cinema, VR, videogames).



## Connecting the dots

As digital media create a “virtual habitat”, the traditional elements of our habitat (earth, water, fire and air) become a lens through which to see how digital media could evolve. This lens is based on the symbolism of the elements, which traces back thousands of years, because earth, water, fire and air have always been, simply put, what makes human life possible.

Earth is the foundation of our habitat and the “ground” of our existence. In nearly all cultures across the world, the gods of earth are feminine because, like women, the earth “gives birth” to life. Another idea we find in nearly all cultures, is that mankind was molded from the clay of the earth. In this sense, the earth is synonymous with our bodily form. It is our body that allows us to experience our habitat (through our different senses). Indeed, the symbolism of earth points to our relationship with our body.

Water is uninhabitable and unnatural in the sense that it is something to overcome for mankind. Since water must be made habitable by our efforts, water is “virtual”: the virtual exists “potentially” or otherwise merely apparently and must be actualized by ourselves. Maritime civilizations pride themselves on conquering water (making it “habitable”) through relentless effort, giving rise to dynamic cultures that value individual enterprise. As a result, water rewards the pioneers that dare to navigate this “virtual” environment. Indeed, the symbolism of water points to our relationship with virtuality.

Fire is the instrument we use to make our habitat livable. Interestingly, although earth and water are conceived of similarly across cultures, the symbolism of fire differs widely. In the Western myth of Prometheus, fire is stolen from the gods and man-

kind is punished for this theft; in Chinese mythology, it is a gift that is part of the natural order; in Japanese mythology, the dark side of fire can be pacified by other forces. Indeed, the symbolism of fire points to our relationship with technology.

Air is everything that transcends our experience of the world around us. Whether religious or scientific, the transcendent is an unmistakable part of our habitat: the sky is the domain of the most powerful gods that transcend all else, but also of (non-religious) “scientific truths” that transcend our experience (e.g. time, geometry, astronomy, meteorology). Clairvoyants (or psychics) are called “mediums” because they are the bridge between the immanent (the world around us) and the transcendent (that which rises above). Indeed, the symbolism of air points to our relationship with transcendence.

There are different ways of understanding digital media by means of the elements. Most importantly, media provide (like the elements) spaces for us to dwell in, especially now that digital media are creating a virtual habitat. For one thing, the virtual world is like water. Both are unnatural (virtual) environments: offline-online incongruence is the modern-day version of the many ailments sailors long struggled with, and the rising popularity of new media navigators is reminiscent of the cultural influence of maritime explorers. Second, to make the virtual world livable, digital media have to become more like earth, fire and air. From this perspective, we can expect the integration of our bodies (earth) to increasingly depend on connecting different senses to digital media (e.g. speech, haptics, kinetics), the instrumentality (fire) of digital media will grow more culturally diverse (e.g. Chinese platforms governed by Chinese ideals), and more channels for hyper-experiences (air) will emerge (e.g. immersive games, VR).

## Implications

- As consumers are willing to spend more and more time in virtual worlds, we should expect innovation that makes these worlds more livable (based on symbolism of the elements of earth, fire and air): different types of interfaces based on different senses (earth), platforms developed against a cultural background (fire), and channels for hyper-experiences (air).
- Although the elements help us to understand how digital media could evolve, the question remains to what extent virtual worlds will create new relationships that are different from the relationships we have with the traditional elements. For this reason, comprehending the deviant ontology of the virtual world becomes a pressing issue, as we have **noted** before.