

Essay for Cinema Journal
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Digital Media in *Cinema Journal*—1995-2008

Lifts her cup of black unsweetened coffee. Mouse-clicks.
How many times has she done this?
How long since she gave herself to the dream? Maurice's
expression for the essence of being a footagehead.
Damien's Studio Display fills with darkness absolute. It is as if
she participates in the very birth of cinema, that Lumière
moment, the steam locomotive about to emerge from the
screen, sending the audience fleeing, out into the Parisian
night.
William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*.¹

William Gibson's 2004 novel *Pattern Recognition*, his first departure from the influential cyberpunk science fiction genre that he originated, imagines the rebirth of cinema engendered by digital media. Gibson's novel imagines a post-YouTube media culture in which networked fans or "footageheads" obsessively view, share, and discuss an untitled piece of video called simply "the footage" composed of "one hundred and thirty four previously discovered fragments." Importantly, this piece of avant garde art circulates on the Internet just as Henry Jenkins predicts video will in a Hollywood gatekeeper-less environment. He asserts that the Internet can only have positive effects upon aesthetic diversity and quality, for it permits producers to circumvent the "cultural gatekeepers who have narrowed the potential diversity of network television or Hollywood cinema,"² and this is exactly what Gibson envisions.

This scenario is not an especially challenging one for film scholars. If a culturally important or extremely popular piece of serialized video with interesting aesthetic qualities, a filmic mise en scene, and human actors were to come to prominence on the Internet, it would not be difficult to write about it in the context of existing film scholarship. That has not yet happened, though I (and William Gibson) believe that it is only a matter of time until it does. Such "footage," digital video that resembles older avant garde film to such an extent that it is called footage in defiance of its existing as a digital signal rather than celluloid, would encourage scholars to employ the methods of textual analysis, industrial and historical research, and

ethnographic audience studies and other reception studies that have characterized film and television studies until now.

But even if it doesn't, even if born-digital video fails to produce a work of art and a cultural product comparable in scope and importance to cinema proper, we still need to study it in the meantime. The challenge that faces cinema and media scholars today is to learn some of the new visual languages that arise from popular digital moving image practices. Video games and websites are more forms of practice than they are texts, but they are rich visual moving image artifacts and fecund sites of extramediation—though they may work directly to spin off television programs or webisodes in the way that Felicia Day's Internet-native *World of Warcraft* series "The Guild" has done, they also provide the raw materials that artists, videographers, and amateurs are using to create moving image media.³ Video games, in particular, are finding wide usage as production tools for video and filmmakers. The resulting machinima (a neologism combining "machine" with "cinema") videos employ the games as engines to produce narratives with sound, dialogue, story, mise en scene, seriality, audiences: all the feature we use to talk about film and television. As Michael Nitsche writes in the sidebar to his blog FreePixel, "FreePixel looks at video games as part of the moving image culture. Games are not movies. But games use moving image tradition in their presentation. That is why FreePixel offers a critical look at games and their expressive qualities that grow from the use of the moving image."⁴

I am not advocating that film and media scholars drop everything and weld their hands to an Xbox 360 controller or become one of the 11 million players of the Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game *World of Warcraft*, most of whom spend twenty hours or more a week killing monsters and rolling for epic gear with their friends in this virtual world.⁵ But those who do, even for a week or two, will be pleasantly surprised at how well the analytical skills honed by years of visual analysis serve them. They will also discover a surprisingly open field and relative lack of competition. Communication scholars, often the first to write about popular digital media practices such as chatrooms, advertising, and video games, tend to focus on issues such as media effects, addiction studies, or community formation, and are loathe to take up these objects as visual artifacts and really read them. Scholars such as Henry Lowood of Stanford's PlayOn research group study machinima made using *World of Warcraft* with attention to the social effects of video games but purposely disavow study of the "aesthetic aspect" of either machinima or the video game itself. This is a sad omission given these machinima's global distribution and cultural influence, and

general coolness and interestingness, but a great opportunity for film and television scholars. His excellent article "Storyline, Dance/Music, or PvP? Game Movies and Community Players in *World of Warcraft*" traces the rich history of player-created video game movies, a history that parallels the development of the games themselves. In it, he writes "I am less concerned with an aesthetic evaluation of these movie projects than with aspects of *World of Warcraft* as social space, player community, performance technology, and intellectual property."⁶ *Cinema Journal's* coverage of digital media has tended to focus on the latter, an area well-trodden by scholars in other disciplines such as game studies and law at the expense of a skillset that it brings to the table that is uniquely its own—aesthetic evaluation.⁷

Even those who know definitively that they will never want to write about any video game have incentive to spend some time with them in the spirit that one might watch film or television programs from other cultures, in languages that they do not know. Just as it is possible for a non-Chinese speaking film scholar to write about Chinese film, we might acknowledge the gulf of inexperience separating us from born digital media, yet take it seriously as an object of study.

Let me clarify what I mean by "some time" with video games. Unlike other video based media forms, such as television in particular, video games measure and display user *performance*. Tender-egoed academics (and I count myself among these) dislike the idea of appearing less than expert at any screen-based pursuit, especially if they are public. The desire to be "good" at games rather than simply playing them to look at and experience them causes scholars to put undue pressure on themselves, and discourages them from trying because they don't "have the time." I don't believe that time, however, is always the issue; scholars who would happily invest two or more hours watching Japanese reality television programs, telenovelas, or films well outside their realm of expertise might not as happily spend this amount of time playing *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life*, or *Bioshock*, fearing that the performative aspect of these games broadcasts their lack of expertise. However, there are compelling reasons for film and media scholars to invest those bits of time.

Contemporary filmic narratives become more legible to the viewer who plays video games.⁸ Video games' and other digital media forms' *mise en scenes*, recursive narratives, visual styles, forms of dialogue, narratives of progress, and modes of interactivity have informed film and television programs for several years now, and will do so even more as media becomes more digitally convergent. *Run*

Lola Run (1998) has been described as a video game, its recursive retelling of the story through multiple lines mimicking the “choose your own adventure” logic of early interactive games. *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-present) the current darling of many a serial science fiction fan, offers particular intellectual rewards to readers who have played video games, especially Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing games like *Everquest*, *Lineage*, and *World of Warcraft*. Players of these games will feel the series’ obsessions with respawning and exchangeable bodies snap into place as they recognize them from their own experiences with avatars and multiple lives. Playing video games or spending time in a virtual world will help scholars learn the images, narrative logics, and tropes from post 1995-films and television programs are sourced. *Cinema Journal* has published essays in this vein, but more scholarship on born-digital media needs to be solicited and supported. In this essay, I will do a brief review of this journal’s history in publishing digital scholarship, and argue for why more studies of born digital media will serve the field.

There has been much crowing over the arrival of the first “born digital” generation in recent years. Popular books such as *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* and *Generation Digital: Politics, Commerce, and Childhood in the Age of the Internet* affirm the existence of a new generation of users defined by media and technology use. Even digital culture’s critics concede the discreteness or specialness of this group in relation to media while decrying its value or lack thereof: *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future* affirms the uniqueness of this group while characterizing them as lazy, shallow, and stupid.⁹ As Siva Vaidhyanathan points out this dichotomy is both false and moot since “college students are not as ‘digital’ as we might wish to pretend.”¹⁰

In addition, this group is rhetorically defined not solely by its possession of special knowledge, but equally by its ignorance or inexperience—the digital generation is associated as much with media devices they have *not* used or heard of as by those they have. As the “Beloit College Mindset List” has been documenting for the last ten years, the Class of 2010 “has never seen Johnny Carson alive on television” and this year’s class, the class of 2009, “don’t remember when cut and paste involved scissors.” Other generations have been defined by their never having used cassette tapes or vinyl records. However, this year’s class is also defined in part by digital media consumption: Pixar and digital cameras have always existed for them.¹¹ Their experiences with “born digital” rather than transcoded-from-analog media, media such as Pixar and other CGI-produced

films, video games, mp3's, and YouTube videos produced by themselves and by others precede, replace, or at least stand in parallel with their experiences with film. Theirs is not a crime of forgetting or fickleness, for you can't forget what you have never known. Likewise, scholars who have joined SCMS in within the last four years only know the organization as one that includes television and other media, such as digital media; they don't know or remember it as a film-only organization. They are not exactly "born digital" media scholars, but the name change has left that door open.

SCMS's junior members are the beneficiaries of a change in the identity of the organization that started many years ago and was uneasily resolved in 2003. *Cinema Journal's* content between 1995—the year that the first commercial web browser, Netscape, found its way into people's homes and heralded the Internet's utility as a medium for graphical and moving images—and 2008 covered topics such as new media and the war on terror, digital distribution, and questions of space in films using digital processes. Not all have viewed this as a happy change--In 2008, Charlotte Brunsdon wrote "initially, television was inferior to cinema—and to older, more authentic (music-hall) or prestigious forms (theater); now it is inferior to 'digital media,' as well as having a bit of an identity crisis of its own."¹² Yet despite the perceived trendiness or "sexiness" of new media this is has not been the case in *Cinema Journal*. During this thirteen-year period *Cinema Journal* published twelve articles, out of a total of 509, on digital media as a *main* focus of study, rather than as a tool for studying television and film or as a thematic concern within individual films or programs. The journal was relatively quick to recognize the impact of computers upon film scholarship--in 1995, *Cinema Journal* published an article by Ben Singer entitled "Hypermedia as Scholarly Tool" summarizing the benefits of digital media such as CD-ROMS, hypermedia, scholarly databases, and hypertext for film scholars. Similarly, articles that referenced the Internet and/or digital media as a topic or theme within science fiction film such as Doran Larson's 1997 "Machine as Messiah: Cyborgs, Morphs, and the American Body Politic" contributed to the "rich tradition of cyborg and android-film criticism that explores the ambiguous state of boundary wars between male and female, machines and humans, or human spontaneity and capitalist rationalization"¹³ but retained their focus on film and television criticism and history.

In 2004, the year after SCS formally adopted the "M," the Spring issue of *Cinema Journal* included an "In Focus" section entitled "What is Cinema? What is Cinema Journal?" that reflected upon this change

to the organization's name and intellectual mission. Barry Keith Grant's essay in this issue "Diversity or Dilution: Thoughts on Film Studies and the SCMS" expresses "concern about the consequences" of "SCMS's new pluralism" and an assertion that "it is crucial to preserve the integrity of film studies as a distinctive discipline."¹⁴ There were seven articles in this section, two of which were about digital and new media in particular: Anna Everett's 2004 essay "Click This: From Analog Dreams to Digital Realities" and Catherine Russell's "New Media and Film History: Walter Benjamin and the Awakening of Cinema." Everett's was the first essay on digital media to appear in the *Journal* that did not focus on digital media in relation to film and television copyright, fair use, and distribution, but rather as an object of study in and for itself. Her essay ended with an appeal to cinema and television scholars to maintain the field's relevance in the digital age by producing scholarship on born digital media. This argument may not be compelling to scholars who view the field's purpose as the conservation of great works in older media. However, the appeal was distinctive from others that argued for "more digital media in a bid to stave off irrelevance because it had a political stance—it specifically critiqued the "inability of new media technologies to break free of damaging ideologies and presumptions," particularly those about race, as part of its call to scholars to put their shoulders to the wheel of digital media studies.¹⁵

In 2004, James Bennett wrote in a blunt appeal to the readership of *Cinema Journal*, "it's time for television studies to go digital." He notes the simply transferring methods and knowledge from television studies to new media "repeats the sins of film scholars against television, which often took screen studies to TV, but only as a slightly less aesthetically interesting/worthy object of study."¹⁶ Bennett is correct in reminding us that television (or cinema)-centric methods for studying digital media will not work. Expanding the focus from film and television to born-digital media such as websites, games, and digital video in this journal as well as in the field generally honors the distinctiveness of born digital media. It also lets those of us with training in race, gender, and ethnicity studies of media repair the mistake made with other media forms; rather than bringing these critiques to bear after the shouting is over, those with expertise in the field of race, ethnicity, and media studies (such as Everett) can bring their expertise to bear on digital media while it is still in formation.

The reason to study digital media is not because it's "trendy" or sexy—the bloom is off the rose, as the many young professors and graduate students trying to publish their work on digital media can attest. As Ted Friedman notes in his history of computing and culture,

"There was a great Nintendo commercial in the 1990s in which a kid on vacation with his Game Boy started seeing everything as Tetris blocks...The commercial captured the most remarkable quality of interactive software: the way it seems to restructure perception, so that even after you've stopped playing, you continue to look at the world a little differently."¹⁷ The human Tetris gameshow represents an unsuccessful extension of video game logics into television reality programming, but heralds a deeper visual shift towards video game conventions, indeed, requires these as part of the interpretive work and pleasure of viewing the film and television text. While as Vaidyanathan reminds us, not all kids (or adults) are part of the "digital generation," many of them come from a screen culture that assumes video game familiarity, if not expertise. Films and television programming are deeply imbued with these forms. Thus, scholars of film and television ought to understand born digital media whether or not we wish to write about them. They are part of an imaging practice that is converging with what we have always called, by the most conventional definition, cinema and television.

Notes

- Bauerlein, Mark. The Dumbest Generation : How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (or, Don't Trust Anyone under 30). New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008.
- Bennett, James. "Television Studies Goes Digital." Cinema Journal 47.3 (2008): 158-66.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte. "Is Television Studies History?" Cinema Journal 47.3 (2008): 127-37.
- Ducheneaut, Nicolas with Nick Yee, Don Wen, and Greg Wadley. "Avatar Survey: Time Spent in-World and Customizing Avatar." PlayOn: Exploring the Social Dimensions of Virtual Worlds. Stanford, California 2008. Vol. 2008.
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<http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/starwars.html>
- Kolker, Robert. "The State of Things." Cinema Journal 43.4 (2004): 91-93.
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- Vaidhyanathan, Siva. "Generational Myth." The Chronicle Review (2008).

¹ William Gibson, Pattern Recognition (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2003) 23.

² Henry Jenkins, "Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars?: Digital Cinema, Media Convergence, and Participatory Culture,"

<http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/starwars.html>.

³ <http://www.watchtheguild.com/>.

⁴ <http://gtmachinimablog.lcc.gatech.edu/>

⁵ Nicolas with Nick Yee Ducheneaut, Don Wen, and Greg Wadley, "Avatar Survey: Time Spent in-World and Customizing Avatar," PlayOn: Exploring the Social Dimensions of Virtual Worlds (Stanford, California: 2008), vol. 2008.

http://blogs.parc.com/playon/archives/2008/08/avatar_survey_t.html

⁶ Henry Lowood, "Storyline, Dance/Music, or Pvp? Game Movies and Community Players in World of Warcraft," Games and Culture 1.4 (2006): 636.

⁷ Robert Kolker makes Ducheneaut, "Avatar Survey: Time Spent in-World and Customizing Avatar." a similar claim regarding film studies' need to "shift back to the text and return to the seriousness and celebration of complexity, history, and politics." Commendably, he extends this claim to the "television text, or the text of a video game or Web site, or the larger texts of medical imaging, of the interrelationship of film and painting, photography, and the graphic arts." See Robert Kolker, "The State of Things," Cinema Journal 43.4 (2004).

⁸ Marsha Kinder makes this case far more elegantly than I can, and expands it to include films such as Bunuels' that can be productively understood in light of digital media technologies despite its predating their development. See

⁹ John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, Born Digital : Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives (New York: Basic Books, 2008), Kathryn C. Montgomery, Generation Digital : Politics, Commerce, and Childhood in the Age of the Internet (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007). Mark Bauerlein, The Dumbest Generation : How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (or, Don't Trust Anyone under 30) (New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008).

¹⁰ Siva Vaidhyanathan, "Generational Myth," The Chronicle Review (2008). <http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i04/04b00701.htm>.

¹¹ See <http://www.beloit.edu/mindset/2009.php>. Many thanks to Harriet Green, reference librarian at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, whose ability to identify and locate this website showed me that the 1957 film *Desk Set* was correct: there is no doubt that librarians outperform computers at research tasks.

¹² Charlotte Brunson, "Is Television Studies History?," Cinema Journal 47.3 (2008): 128.

¹³ Doran Larson, "Machine as Messiah: Cyborgs, Morphs, and the American Body Politic," Cinema Journal 36.4 (1997).

¹⁴ Barry Keith Grant, "Diversity or Dilution? Thoughts on Film Studies and the Scms," Cinema Journal 43.3 (2004): 90.

¹⁵ Anna Everett, "Click This: From Analog Dreams to Digital Realities," Cinema Journal 43.3 (2004): 96.

¹⁶ James Bennett, "Television Studies Goes Digital," Cinema Journal 47.3 (2008).

¹⁷ Ted Friedman, Electric Dreams : Computers in American Culture (New York: New York University Press, 2005) 124.