

digital media criticism



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1. *Introduction*

Everything is digital and yet the digital is nothing. No human can touch it, smell it, and taste it. It just beeps and blinks and reports itself in glowering alphanumerics.

—McKenzie Wark

What are Digital Media?

Using exclusively technical criteria, one could say digital media are anything that uses a digital mode of communication—including, for example, television, computers, cell phones, and video games. But as I suggested in the preface, the key issue about digital media is not that they are *new* media forms in some dramatic break from the past, but rather they are new ways of configuring issues of production, consumption, and distribution of media. These are the new ways of understanding human–media relations that define how I approach digital media in this book. I would like to suggest that there are four important types of relationships that new media outlets animate. These four relationships can be characterized as *sharing*, *socializing*, *communicating*, and *interacting*. I now turn to a discussion of these, keeping in mind that while most new media combine all (or most) of these relationships in how they function, only *one* of these is its *primary* (i.e., determinative) function. In other words, though cell phones, gaming, the Internet, and social media (SM)—the four new media discussed in this book—can do all of the above, only one of these is the most common way in which they are used.

Sharing

The notion of sharing refers to the ways in which digital media have transformed how people share the products of their (media) labor. Whether it

is through their websites, blogs, vlogs, or videos, the digital age is characterized by a powerful personal/sociological act—sharing. Sharing is of course not something new; what is new, rather, is the opportunity to *mediatize* sharing, making it an act not just accessible to the media elite and power brokers who have a place at the table on the network Sunday morning talk shows, but to everyone with an Internet connection and a desire to produce content for sharing.

Today, there is a formal term to describe this relationship—consumer-generated content. While consumer-generated content (CGC) can be text based (such as blogs and comments on videos), the most important kind of CGC is video.¹ This is indeed the age of video—the digital camera and user-friendly editing software have allowed for an entire generation of digital artists (admittedly, the word artist may not apply to a lot of CGC!) to make their work available online through websites that focus on CGC. While there are numerous CGC websites, YouTube remains the standard-bearer, its own institutional history tied with the arrival of video as a key text of the digital age. In chapter 3, I examine YouTube as an example of CGC, focusing on issues relevant to media criticism by offering an account of the dominant *genres* that people share through their videos.

Socializing

Socializing is as old as humanity. It is the way through which culture is enacted and community constructed. It is thus not surprising that one of the important ways that digital media function is to create new ways for people to socialize. Primarily, this is undertaken through patterns of community formation that develop and parallel those in the real world, but equally mobilize new group identities and communities. These social groups run the spectrum of human needs from religion to politics, self-help, gossip, and mindless twittering.

Today there is a formal term to describe these relationships—social media (SM).² SM can be textualized through writing, pictures, and video (in all its hybrid variations), the emphasis being less on the production of these texts (along traditional aesthetic and cultural standards) than on their mobilization as agents of sociability. Once posted, they invite attention, response, and engagement with the community they are introduced into. Membership in such communities is then measured, evaluated, and circumscribed by the extent of one's self-involvement and, more importantly, by the response one generates. While there are numerous SM websites, perhaps the two standard-bearers are Facebook and MySpace. In

chapter 4, I examine Facebook as an example of SM focusing on issues relevant to criticism—deconstructing the textual content of Facebook pages, and evaluating how individual *auteurs* are maintained in a socializing space.

Communicating

Communication is of course at the heart of all human experience (and central to the field of *mass communication*). As is often noted, culture is only understood through acts of communication and communication is only possible through cultural means. While it is true that all media work, whether institutional or individuals, are acts of communication, there are important ways in which digital media have changed ideas about communication. One of the important ways in which communicating is now being reworked is the idea of mobility.³

One of the biggest changes that contemporary mobile media have brought is a fundamental shift in the relationship between people and the spaces they live in and communicate with/through. The quintessential mobile media are of course cell phones—they have created a way for us to take our media environment with us wherever we go. Unlike television, which is anchored in a room, across from a viewing sofa, and cinema, which is best enjoyed sitting in a darkened room, stretched out before a giant screen, and consuming an extra-large-sized Coke and popcorn, the cell phone makes the idea of communicating a mobile experience.

And today, the cell phone is fast being replaced by a variety of mobile devices or *communicators* that allow us to talk, watch, and listen to a range of media texts. It is this composite range of functions that shapes how we need to think of communicating as a function of digital media. And specifically, we need to understand that while a cell phone may carry a range of functions, what it primarily provides is the most basic of human communicative functions—talking and writing. For most people, television and cinema are still enjoyed on the big screen (even if it is available on your iPhone) and CGC is best enjoyed on one's computer. On the other hand, our day-to-day (and often hour-to-hour) experience of daily life—the detritus of daily communication—is now firmly in the hands (no pun intended!) of the cell phone. In chapter 5, I examine how *communicating* takes place through the form and function of cell phones, focusing on issues relevant to media criticism—specifically, deconstructing how cell phones are encoded with culturally and ideologically specific meanings.

Interacting

The idea of engaging with one another—interacting in a word—is a central part of everyone’s life. Walking to class every day, I observe students interacting in line at the coffee shop, clustering around a video a friend has just sent them on their cell phones. A class, of course, is itself a form of structured interaction (not always fun) as are the long evenings at a favorite sports bar or other hangout. In a similar vein, we interact with and through our media technologies, whether it is shouting at a poor signal on our cell phones, throwing a shoe at a poorly functioning television, or sitting back at the movies to enjoy a digitally sculpted landscape. What is important in the world of digital media is the relationship of the viewer to the media form itself. Rather than being passive or inert observers of narrative, digital media have elevated interaction to one of the most (if not *the* most) important elements of media consumption. While interaction takes place with all digital media—as seen in cell phone conversations and texts, posts on videos, responses to blogs, and the posting of video commentaries—it is at the heart of one kind of digital media that is defined by its interactivity—the video game.⁴

Video games draw on the narrative exegesis of older media forms—film, television, and online content—but they are typified by a specific interactive experience, *playing* the narrative, rather than just watching it. This experience of playing, of being inside the action, rather than outside of it, is characteristic of all games, but especially of online games, where the *original* narrative of the game is increasingly reworked and recast through a cast of thousands of players. This interactivity is the focus of chapter 6, where I examine how *interacting* takes place through the narrative pleasure of playing a game. This experience is used to animate issues relevant to media criticism—specifically, understanding how an ethnographic (or experiential) understanding of video games might be formulated.

In-class Discussion Questions

How do the four characteristics of digital media (sharing, socializing, communicating, and interacting) relate to your media use? Think about your media use over the last 24 hours and chart your use along the four characteristics identified here. Discuss those in class. Based on this exercise, do you agree with the typology offered here? What would you add to this list? How would you change it?

Why Learn Media Criticism?

Learning media criticism is like learning a new language. If you speak English, then you are familiar with the Roman alphabet. This gives you a head start in learning, say, Spanish or German—at least you recognize the letters. Media criticism is similar—many of the kinds of criticism (genre, narrative, auteur, cultural) you know from taking part in their pleasures—the unfolding of a storyline; the incredulity that a show would kill off a major character; the nuanced pleasure of watching a show you have watched for a long time. What media criticism does is provide you with a formal language that allows for an understanding of the cultural role and placement of such narratives. All of this does not answer the question of why criticism? Why bother to learn this new language? Why not just enjoy YouTube, without having to take on the burden of understanding it? Why spoil it all by having to deconstruct it? In what follows, I will outline three important reasons to undertake this task and at the end, invite you to share your reasons.

Media Surround Us

It is much like the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the apartment we live in. Let me take you through your day—what do you do when you wake up? Does your cell phone alarm wake you up? Do you turn on the coffee maker and your laptop at the same time? When you get to class (or to work), how often do you check your email? In the middle of the day, do you take a break to watch your favorite soap (or do you T-Vo it at home)? This notion that media and its messages are not outside of our existence and the flow of daily life but *inside* of them is central to why media criticism is so important. It brings you into a new engagement with what makes up the stuff of your daily life and—I might get a little heavy on you—the journey of your life.

Media Affect Us

Let us, for a moment, indulge in a stereotype. Think of the most slack teenager you know—perhaps it is your cousin, brother, or sister (dare I say it even might be you at some point earlier in your life?). Ask yourself what percentage of their brain is occupied with what they have acquired from

the media. What percentage did you decide—10%? 50%? Higher? Naturally, there is no scientific way to calculate this—and we are indulging in stereotypes, assuming that teenagers are little more than bundles of angst, hormones, and hard rock. But there is a wider point to this exercise. When I have this discussion in class, my students are happy to admit that upwards of 50% of their former (teenage) brains were full of the films they watched, the cell phones they talked on, the video games they played, and the television shows that influenced them growing up. What I am suggesting is that media criticism allows for a systematic engagement for the effects of living in a media-saturated world—the complex of ways it affects who we are, and often who we become.

Media Tell Our Stories

Ask yourself about the most personal of choices you make—the clothes you wear, the majors you choose in college, the careers you hope to have, the people you hang out with. In what ways has your personal history with media affected those choices? Has a favorite TV show shaped some of these choices? (*Sex in the City* perhaps?) But this is just one part of the equation: Our relationship to television and film is one directional. The media speaks and we listen and negotiate, accept, or reject its messages. In this way, we let the media tell our story. With digital media, we are just as likely to tell our story through the media. One of the most profound consequences of the digital revolution has been the idea of public media, where participating in the media is not the provenance of a few elite reporters or commentators but open to anybody with a computer and an imagination. When you upload a video, write a blog, post a comment, you become part of using media to tell your story. And this is where media criticism works its magic. Since it is at its heart about understanding the moment (and conditions) of creation, it allows you to tell your story in powerful, meaningful ways. It shows you how to (and how not to) construct your mediated identity. To put this more informally, it makes you a better storyteller.

In-class Discussion Questions:

In what ways do media surround you? How does it affect you? What are your favorite films and television shows? Are their characters on TV and film that you feel tell your story? Do you use new media to tell your story? In what way?

What Is Media Criticism?

Media criticism is fundamentally constituted by its institutional allegiance—it is a scholarly enterprise. It is important to point this out as a foundational principle in all that follows, for there is much that may pass for media criticism that is not. So let me begin with what media criticism is not—it is not a popular journalistic accounting of programming or content on media. *TV Guide* provides an evaluatory and descriptive account of what is on the week's schedule; film reviews in both popular and specialized film magazines provide a largely industry-centered account of the merits or otherwise of a film; online forums for different media events do the same, provide an often disjunctive and temporally fragmented account of specific media stimuli (a posted video, an inflammatory blog, etc.). What distinguishes media criticism from all of the above is audience—media criticism is written for and by scholars and students of media. These scholars/students may draw on popular journalistic accounts or blogs about these shows to understand the role of that text/media form, but the entire project is based on the idea of critical scholarship—where media forms themselves are the objects of study. When asked by someone about what I do, I provide the following answer: “I used to be a journalist, now I study what journalists do.” Making that transference from a practitioner of media to a scholar of media entailed learning a special language—the language of media criticism. So what are the central features of this language? Broadly speaking, four concerns underlie all of media criticism—including the methods that are discussed in this book.

First, media criticism is centrally involved in a wider societal conversation about media culture. Historically, this conversation was anchored in ideas about what constitutes *high* and *low* culture. High culture was the realm of theater, art, and drama; low culture? the stuff of folk song, popular rhyme, and dance. Later, film joined the pantheon of high culture, with television occupying low culture. Much of the history of television criticism has been an engagement—using the academy as a platform—to take television seriously as a popular art, and a cultural industry in its own right. Film criticism has followed a similar (albeit not as tortured) in seeking the legitimacy of film as a popular and culturally relevant art form. Today digital media are part of this conversation. Should we take the ravings of bloggers seriously? Are the videos posted on YouTube worthy of scholarly attention? Aren't all video games mindless and violent? This book invites you to be part of this conversation, as we think (and stumble) through ways to interrogate digital culture in a sustained, scholarly manner.

Second, all media criticism is focused by understanding the ways that media is experienced. Different schools of thought have focused on different aspects or parts of this experience. Approaches that focus on how a television show is put together are often called *industry criticism* where the role of the producer, director, and actors inform an understanding of how a show is experienced. Approaches that focus on how a text itself is constituted—its genre for example—use an understanding of its internal and discursive elements to engage with how such texts can be (pleasurably or otherwise) experienced. Such approaches are usually referred to as *cultural criticism*. Finally, approaches that are grounded in direct accounts of people’s use and understanding of media are referred to as *ethnographic criticism*. Such approaches naturally privilege the experience of media as constituted by the person’s subjectivity and social position(s).

Third, all of media criticism is anchored in a specific mode of scholarly accounting—making wider conceptual claims (about issues such as identity, sexuality, media use) based on an understanding of a media form (or text) and its relationships to its socio-cultural setting. It is this mode of scholarly accounting that separates media criticism from other forms of *critical* evaluation such as journalistic accounts of blogs. As Vande Berg, Wenner, and Gronbeck (2004, p. 27) put it, “the act of criticism involves organizing, systematically and thoroughly describing, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the patterned relationships in texts.”

Finally, since media criticism is part of a scholarly conversation, it follows the writing/literary conventions established in the academy. Typically, essays of media criticism, while varying in their argumentative development or narrative structure, all conform to three governing principles—the embedding of the argument in a wider body of scholarship that exists on the media form itself (television or film); a specific set of issues relevant to the show/topic at hand (for example, representations of body image of women would draw on relevant literature in feminist criticism); and an understanding of the wider implications of the study—sometimes referred to as the “so-what?” question. A common “so-what?” question in media criticism is engaging with concerns of identity politics—a term that refers to the ways in which power in a society is implicated in relations between its members, divided by visible categories of gender, race, and ethnicity, among others.

Guiding Principles for the Digital Media Critic

I would like to suggest that there are four important principles for digital

media criticism (in a way that builds on television and film criticism). I see these principles not as immutable or characterized by a theoretical fixity but rather as guideposts for digital criticism.

First, *foreground emergence*. A simple fact: Digital media are in their infancy. While there is now an extended history of media criticism for film and television paralleling the development, growth, and change for each genre (such as the sit-com or the western) there is no such tradition for the digital world. Given their recent emergence, there appears, at least on the surface, no particular order or structure to the videos posted on consumer-generated sites, the conversation of SM sites, the texts of cell phones, or the playing styles of gamers. How does one find a way to organize this chaos? I would suggest using the principle of emergence—where the focus is on understanding the shifts and patterns of media use without assuming a prior formalism. By this, I mean the critic has to stop herself from saying, “Oh this is like a western,” or “this is like a stand up comic” and so forth. Rather, one has to be open to understanding the texts of digital media on their terms, as an emergent media language whose rules and orders are still evolving.

Second, *historicize*. In contradiction to the first principle, while it is important to engage with digital media on its own terms, it is equally important to ask the historical question—What does this video or text message or video game command resemble from older histories of media? As it is often noted, nothing is really new, it just looks that way. A colleague of mine, Elle Roushazamir, often likes to note, “the more complex a thing looks, the more simple it is.” A history of television cannot be studied without understanding the crucial role of radio in the development of what became television genres—the radio dramas led to television’s prime-time dramas, radio talk shows led to the plethora of day-time television talk shows and so forth. In the same vein, it behooves the critic to examine YouTube videos with an eye out for issues of genre resemblance, narrative form, and character types from the history of television and cinema.

Third, prioritize *hybridity*. Hybridity refers to the notion of combination, a mix of different elements to create something new. The genres of television often advance or change through hybridity, taking, for example, elements of drama and elements of the sit-com to create a *dramedy*. In a similar vein (and building on the first two principles) much of what is being created on digital media is a process of bringing together often-different textual and cultural influences into new hybrid genres. This is an especially important principle for issues of mixing, re-mixing, and the kinds of cross-platform combinations that are a staple of culture online. On any

given day, one can see videos on YouTube that draw elements from a range of media genres—most typically, news reports, talk shows, music videos, and animation—to create parodies, commentaries, and dialogue.

Fourth, center *use*. Digital media are fundamentally different from older media technologies, which were largely controlled by its producers. The role of digital media, whether it is the Internet or video games or cell phones, is strongly determined by how it is used. The digital moment may be many things, but at its heart it is about viral participation. Without the involvement of millions of video producers there would be no YouTube. Without the willing participation of millions of gamers there would be no online games. Without the willing use of innumerable thumbs, there would be no market (and community) for texting. In each case, an understanding of digital media must begin the opening out of media work, from a handful of specialists to anybody with a computer and a creative mind.

Notes

1. Consumer-Generated Content (CGC) is the term most commonly used to describe media content generated by viewers. Other terms that are often used include *consumer-generated media* and *user-generated content*. It is important to historicize CGC. Before the age of digital video, CGC was evident in home movies, scrapbooks, and picture albums. In an earlier generation, family songs and symbolic traditions represented locally (or individually) generated content. In the digital age, CGC comes in many forms including videos, websites (especially those that invite audience involvement) blogs, podcasts, cell phone photography (and videography), open source websites (such as Wikipedia), and even email. CGC is a central component in the development of what is often termed Web 2.0 whose primary characteristic is the shift from a linear relationship between producers and consumers to a multiple, complex node of connection, based on the breakdown of the distinction between consumers and producers. With this new relationship, the audience as an active agent of media production, distribution, and consumption replaces historically static ideas about the audience as a passive receiver of content. The company Hitwise, a leading chronicler of the growth of CGC, identifies 2005 as the year of CGC. As Lee Ann Perscott, one of their senior research analysts puts it “2005 was the year that consumers took control of the Internet....CGC became mainstream, thanks to the proliferation of technology that changed how Internet users find, share and create content.” (www.imediaconnection.com/aspx7800; accessed 2/10/09)

At the heart of the CGC revolution is digital video. Chapter 3 in this book focuses on perhaps the most well known of all CGC sites—YouTube. YouTube receives more than 10 hours of video every minute on its site and averages 5.3 billion video streams a month (MFM, 12/30/08). However, there are many others including Atom.com, BlipTV, Revver.com, Yahoo and Google video, Hulu.com, Joost.com, Veoh.com, Blinkx.com, Flickr.com (add your favorite CGC website here).

Measurement of viewership of CGC video is in its infancy. The company Tube Mogul study showed that most people watched online videos for only a few seconds. They looked at 188,000 videos, streamed 22 million times on six video sites. Nine out of ten people watched a piece of video for less than ten seconds. About half were watched for a full minute, but only one in ten got a full five minutes (Industry blog Message from Michael (MFM), 12/30/08).

The scholarly literature on CGC is still emerging (as is true of all the topics being covered in this book) and I will provide a brief account of some of the literature I have found interesting. In other words, what follows is not a literature review, but a subjective (and small) sample of the literature. Students are encouraged to use these readings (or other more recent ones) as a first step in understanding the emerging canon on digital culture. Jenkins's influential book, *Convergence Culture*, advances perhaps the most well-known concept dealing with CGC—*participatory culture*. As he puts it, “the circulation of media content depends heavily on consumer’s active participation. The term participatory culture contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship. Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other, according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understand.” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3) He links the role of such participation with the process of media convergence, which he is at pains to point out is not about the merging of technological forms, but about behavior: “Convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections about media content. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others.” (ibid) Burgess and Green’s (2009) book *The Uses of YouTube: Online Video and the Politics of Participatory Culture* is one of the first full-length analyses of YouTube and builds on Jenkins’s work. The book examines the public debates surrounding the site, demonstrating how it is central to the struggles for authority and control in the new media environment. They argue that understanding CGC is important because it challenges fundamental assumptions about issues of cultural production and consumption. Murphy and Potts (2003), in their theoretically nuanced book *Culture and Technology*, locate CGC within a wider analysis of digital aesthetics (pp. 66–94), focusing on issues of authorship and creativity, arguing that the Internet changes historically privileged notions of “sovereign individuals... (And replacing them with) sharing of the creative process—this is one of the main social benefits of Internet technology.” (p. 73) Manovich’s (2001) book *The Language of New Media* has a number of concepts that can be used to theorize CGC. Perhaps the two most important ones are his principle of *variability* by which he means the essentially unfinished nature of CGC. Videos on YouTube for example can be edited, recast, and reframed in video responses. There is no original point of reference, but an open-ended narrative or variations on a theme. Manovich’s concept of *cultural transcoding* refers to the arrival of a certain kind of cultural and technical competence by users of the net (and producers of CGC):-the mixing of storytelling devices (from the history of film and television) and the use of software as a tool of expression.

One of the earliest theorists of digital culture, Gregory Ulmer, is important to understand CGC. He argued for the merging of the oral, visual, and verbal in digital texts. Summarizing his work, Murphy and Potts (2003) argue that Ulmer saw digital culture as “a new genre...called ‘mystery’ which takes into account the new discursive and conceptual ecology interrelating orality, literacy, and videocy. It combines high

and low cultural explorations and works among science, popular culture, everyday life and private experience.” (93) A visit to YouTube at any given moment will amply attest to the workings of these different dimensions.

The essays in Lundby’s (2008) *Digital Storytelling, Mediatized Stories* provide important theoretical connections (along concepts of authority, narrative, teamwork, representation, and literacy) for an understanding of CGC. Senft’s (2008) study of *cam girls* (girls who broadcast themselves over the web) is one of the few sustained ethnographic studies of motivations and desires in the production of CGC. For other general treatments of CGC see Lister, Dovey, Giddens, Grant and Kelly (2003, pp. 221–231). They also provide a broad accounting of YouTube as a media form.

2. Social Media (SM) is the term most commonly used to describe websites that seek to connect people and facilitate an online gathering (of which MySpace and Facebook are the most important). It is now often used interchangeably with the term Web 2.0. SM can be historicized back to the beginnings of human origin in our evolution as social beings. Most of human existence has been as hunter-gatherer’s working, walking and collecting food and conversation. Sociability, in other words, is built into the human DNA. When we told stories around the fireplace, we were undertaking an early account of SM. In a more contemporary era, examples of SM include letters to the writers, guest columns, calling into radio shows, appearance on TV shows, and participation in media events. In all these instances, the control of the technology itself remained with the producers/developers of the medium. By contrast, one of the key organizing frameworks for contemporary SM is active participation in the creation, maintenance, and development of the media. Broadly speaking, SM encompasses blogs, picture sharing, video logs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, voice over I-P, and almost any kind of online communication that is external to the user. Today, there are numerous examples of SM applications such as those focused on social networking (such as Facebook), or on a variety of specific tastes such as music, news, photo-sharing, or just saying whatever is on one’s mind at that very second, sometimes referred to as microblogging (for example, tweeting). SM websites are some of the most popular websites on the Internet. Wikipedia has surpassed both New York Times and Dictionary.Com in visits; MySpace is the fourth among all sites visited on the Internet (Prescott, 2006, 1). There is an increasing convergence of video and blog in SM sites such as seen in twiddeo, which is a video version of twitter.

Jenkins’s book *Convergence Culture* is also a useful beginning point for understanding SM (especially chapter 4 which deals with fan culture and the Star Wars franchise and chapter 5 on fan writing and the Harry Potter phenomenon). The literature on computer-mediated communication has many textbooks, which address the growth and development of SM as an integral part of the Internet’s history. Barnes (2003), one of the better textbooks, identifies a number of early SM focused on the Internet, especially multiple user domains (MUDs) such as the well-known LambdaMoo. There are a number of excellent edited collections which engage with the social dimensions of the online world; these include *The Internet in Everyday Life* (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002); *Society Online* (Howard and Jones, 2004), and *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*. (Strate, Jacobson and Gibson, 2003) Since I am a former journalist and teach courses on that subject, my favorite books are on the impact of SM on politics. These include Christian Crumlish’s (2004) book, *The Power of Many: How the Living Web is Transforming Politics, Business, and Everyday Life*, and the hugely influential writings of Cass Sunstein, including *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge* (2006),

and *Republic.com 2.0* (2007). Sunstein's writing, while focused on issues of politics and public knowledge, is important for the entirety of the representational work that SM undertakes, including the realms of popular culture, environmental politics, and religion (all topics that remain under explored in the SM literature). Finally, the collections in Boler (2008) *Digital Media and Democracy* explore issues of activism and political change as they intersect with digital culture and SM. Much like *Convergence Culture*, it is important text in that it maps the complex intersections between mainstream mass media and emergent digital culture.

3. Cell Phones: The cell phone presents itself at the periphery of contemporary discourse about digital media. Cell phones lack the hype of Web 2.0 or video games but they have inarguably achieved the status of a mass medium. They have begun to shape how we communicate, their use has created new forms of media-centered relations and in the marketplace they have begun to influence patterns of ownership and acquisition. In the developing world, the cell phone is often the first phone for many individuals, opening new possibilities for communication without the cumbersome, expensive infrastructure required by land lines. Cell phones have become an integral part of our daily consciousness: cops use it as they rush to crime scenes; teenagers use it to connect with their peers; extramarital affairs draw sustenance from them; and war correspondents cradle them on bumpy tank rides. Cell phones often provide the first pictures from a breaking news story (the first video from the London Metro attacks and the Virginia Tech shootings came from cell phone cameras).

The cell phone can be conceptualized as more than a telephone, rather as a *communicator* where voice, text, email, Internet, and now gaming are all integrated into one device allowing for mobility as its defining characteristic (limited of course by the access to cell sites or towers that are in range). Of all these functions, voice and text still dominate the use of cell phones, though this may change with the new generation cell phones such as the iPhone (and its many imitators) that allow for a greater use with a range of its functions. Nokia is the world's largest manufacturer of mobile phones with a market share of approximately 40% in 2008, followed by Samsung and Motorola (both at 14%) and Sony Ericsson at 9%. Based on a global survey of cell phone use and adoption Castells, Ardevol, Qiu, and Sey (2007, p. 7) argue, "Wireless communication networks are diffusing around the world faster than any other communication technology to date. Mobile telephony began to take off world wide in the mid 1990s, when the rate of mobile to mainline telephones went up from 1:34 (1991) to 1:8 (1995). By 2000 there was one mobile phone for less than two mainlines; and by 2003, mobile phone subscriptions had overtaken mainline subscriptions for the first time."

There is now a burgeoning literature on the sociology of the cell phone. A co-edited book by this author (Kavoori and Arceneaux, 2006) entitled *The Cell Phone Reader: Essays in Social Transformation*, brings together essays by leading scholars examining the cell phone as cultural form. For overviews of the social import of the cell phone see Brown, Green, and Harper (2002), Horst and Miller (2006), Ling (2004), and Levinson (2004). For cell phone and identity construction see Leonardi (2003), Katz (1999, 2003), Katz and Aakhus (2002), Kaseniem (2003), Lemish and Cohen (2005), Moni and Anser (2004). For international perspectives and the cell phone see Castells, Ardevol, Qiu, and Sey (2007), Pajnik and Tusek (2002), Rafael (2003), Banerjee and Ros (2004), Ozcan and Kocak (2003), and Kavoori and Chadha

(2006). For a historical perspective on telephones and culture see Rakow (1992) and Agar (2003).

4. Video Games: Video games, media technologies that involve interaction with a video screen, through the mobilization of digital characters and artifacts, are the fastest growing sector of the media industry and have now achieved a level of stability that they can be theoretically engaged with. Genres in video games are based on their use, rather than their narrative, with the important categories including first person shooter, action-adventure, role-playing games, and simulation games. Manufacturer and platform of the game can also distinguish games.

Two texts that directly relate to issues of digital criticism are Ken McAllister's (2004) *Game Work: Language, Power and Computer Game Culture* and Alexander Galloway's (2006)'s *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. They focus on understanding the narrative, textual experience of gaming and are eclectic in their theoretical underpinnings—drawing on the literature of critical and cultural studies, textual analysis, and language studies. I especially admired their ability at *imagining* how gaming studies needs to be theorized on its own terms, rather than merely the application of older textual methods to the study of gaming.

My reading of the gaming literature—while partial and incomplete—suggests three broad categories of scholarship: Overviews of the field; Textual Studies; and Play and Media Use studies.

Overviews: Carr, Buckingham, Burn, and Schott's (2006) edited book, *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play* is easily the most accessible introduction to the field of gaming studies. The first half of the book examines how gaming reworks issues of narrative and genre while the second half examines issues of play and use. Less accessible, but more nuanced is Wolf and Perron's (2003) edited book, *The Video Game Theory Reader*, which has essays on a range of concepts (embodiment, role playing, abstraction, simulation) that can be usefully applied to topical areas (such as the one attempted in this chapter). The most intriguing book I read was Wark's (2007) *Gamer Theory*, which has a stream-of-consciousness style that offers meditations around emotion (which includes chapters on agony, allegory, boredom), subject (America, Battle), and text (each chapter is based on a specific video game—*Sims*, *Cave*, *Rez*, etc.). Finally, Myers's (2003, pp. 1-57) *The Nature of Computer Games: Play as Semiosis*, while largely focused on the nature of play in gaming, has an accessible theorization of gaming as continuous with older forms of symbolic and narrative communication.

Textual Studies: In addition to McAllister (2004) and Galloway (2006), Atkins's (2003) book, *More than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form* frames gaming narratives through issues of modernist/postmodernist notions of *real* and *fiction* before going on to provide a template for the analysis of gaming narratives through *readings* of *Tomb Raider*, *Half-Life*, *Close Combat*, and *SimCity*. Jesper Juul's (2005) *Half Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, while not exclusively focused on narrative, provides a theoretical framework for what constitutes games. Using concepts of storytelling, chance, simulations, role-playing, play, and fiction, he outlines what he calls “rules” of games. Extensively illustrated with images of games and representational devices, the book is in a sense game-like in its narrative organization—something quite unique in the literature I read. Rounding off the books on the subject is Andrew Darley's (2000) *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* which addresses a topic that most of the other literature addresses only tangentially—the links between gaming narratives and the older

media. He theorizes gaming as continuous (and different) with cinema, media spectacles, and television offering a sophisticated rendering of how issues of effects, style, simulation, and experience are reworked in the space of digital culture.

The online journal *Game Studies* is an important forum for students/scholars of gaming. The journal goals are to develop a theoretical/methodological model for the field of gaming studies, rather than just seeing gaming as an extension or modification of other media forms. Three essays in the journal (Ryan, 2001; Simons, 2001; Consalvo, 2006) are explicitly focused on issues of gaming texts and narrative. Ryan provides a detailed theorization of gaming as narrative developing a formula that looks at the intersection between what she calls “internal-external interactivity” and “exploratory/ontological” modes of use. Simons provides (through a discussion of characters, players, representation, simulation, role-playing, etc.) how an account of gaming as a narrative can be constructed while Consalvo provides a *methodological toolkit* for studying gaming, which includes the key issues of defining gaming objects, interfaces, maps, interactions, and worlds.

Industry journals such as *Games for Windows* and *Computer Gaming World* provide an on-going conversation about storytelling and narrative around the latest game. A recent issue of *Games for Windows* had a telling set of interviews with leading writers in the gaming business. Entitled, “Why do video game stories suck?” it addressed issues of what function narrative provides in a game, the links between graphics, writing and playability, and most interestingly the relationship between game designers and writers (Volume 3, February, 2007, pp. 26–29). Commentaries on the content of different games appear occasionally on websites like *Slate.com*, *Salon.com*, and *ZNet.com* and in the mainstream media.

Play and Media Use Studies: Since playing is central to gaming as a media form, it appears as a central, even constitutive element in all the literature on gaming I looked at. Two essays in the journal *Game Studies* (Walther, 2003; Squire, 2002) stand out for their theoretical overview of the subject. Walther (2003) methodically outlines the differences between *playing* and *gaming* suggesting that there are not only historical similarities between games and gaming, but also differences. He suggests “moving from playing to gaming is all about transgressing boundaries and assuming demarcations” (2003, p. 4) and outlines (with the use of graphs) differences between the different *orders* of complexity and transgression in playing and gaming. Squire (2002) outlines pedagogy for understanding and teaching gaming. Play appears as a key element in how game playing can be taught as a social practice and what he terms *activity theory*.

The bulk of the literature on play focuses on the implications of online lives (since most games can be played in a multiplayer mode in an online setting). Two books that provide a theoretical vision of the meaning of such lives are Consalvo (2007) and Castranova (2005). Consalvo studies *cheating* as a sociological category, suggesting a method for understanding ethics and identity in an online setting while Castranova provides an accessible first person narrative of what it is like to enter and live in what he calls *the synthetic world* showing both the limits of such constructions and the possibilities of an identity that emerges from such an immersion. Kelly (2004) provides an overview of the social dynamics of online gaming in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG), while Kolor and Baur (2001) examine another game (*Ultimate Online*) and suggest a three-fold category for understanding online play (tenacious, moderate, and heavy playing).

Finally, two edited books that deal with media literacy: Selfe and Hawisher's (2007) *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century* and Garrelts's (2005) *Digital GamePlay*. The former examines issues of gaming and literacy, a key issue for teachers and students of gaming and the latter, a broad range of case studies of games examining issues of identity politics, violence, digital aesthetics, and form.

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