

# Digital Media in *Cinema Journal*, 1995–2008

by LISA NAKAMURA

*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.<sup>1</sup>

William Gibson's 2003 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 pictures 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 gatekeeperless environment. He stakes a claim for the Internet's positive effects upon aesthetic diversity and quality. Similar to Gibson, Jenkins envisions an Internet that permits producers to circumvent the "cultural gatekeepers who have narrowed the potential diversity of network television or Hollywood cinema."<sup>2</sup>

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-scène*, 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 (like 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

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> (accessed March 30, 2009).

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 Web sites 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* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004–present) *The Guild* (2007–present) has done, they also provide the raw materials that artists, videographers, and amateurs are using to create moving image media.<sup>3</sup> 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-scène*, seriality, and audiences: all the features 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.”<sup>4</sup>

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 eleven 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 chat rooms, advertising, and video games, tend to focus on issues such as media effects, addiction studies, or community formation, and are loath 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 machinima's global distribution and cultural influence, and general coolness and interestingness, but it provides great opportunity for film and television scholars. In his

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 Avatars,” *PlayOn: Exploring the Social Dimensions of Virtual Worlds* (Stanford, CA: 2008), vol. 2008, [http://blogs.parc.com/playon/archives/2008/08/avatar\\_survey\\_t.html](http://blogs.parc.com/playon/archives/2008/08/avatar_survey_t.html) (accessed March 30, 2009).

excellent article “Storyline, Dance/Music, or PvP? Game Movies and Community Players in *World of Warcraft*,” Lowood traces the rich history of player-created video game movies, a history that parallels the development of the games themselves. 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.”<sup>6</sup> *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 skill set that it brings to the table that is uniquely its own—aesthetic evaluation.<sup>7</sup>

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 they 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 “spending some time” with video games. Unlike other video-based media forms, such as television in particular, video games measure and display user performance. Academics with tender egos (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* (Linden Research, 2003–present), or *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007, 2008), fearing that the performative aspect of these games would broadcast 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.<sup>8</sup> Video games’ and other digital media forms’ *mise-en-scènes*, 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* (Tom Tywker, 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*

6 Henry Lowood, “Storyline, Dance/Music, or PvP? Game Movies and Community Players in *World of Warcraft*,” *Games and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2006): 636.

7 Robert Kolker makes 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 website, 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, no. 4 (2004): 91–93.

8 Marsha Kinder makes this case far more elegantly than I can, and expands it to include films such as Buñuel’s that can be productively understood in light of digital media technologies. See “Hotspots, Avatars, and Narrative Fields Forever,” *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2002): 2–15.

*Galactica* (SciFi, 2004–2009), 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 Roleplaying games like *Everquest* (Sony, 1999–present), *Lineage* (NCsoft, 1998–present), 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 about the images, narrative logics, and tropes of many post-1995 films and television programs.

*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.<sup>9</sup> Siva Vaidhyanathan observes, on the other hand, that “college students are not as ‘digital’ as we might wish to pretend.”<sup>10</sup> 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 and texts they have not used or heard of as by those they have. As the “Beloit College Mindset List” has been documenting for the past ten years, the Class of 2010 “has never seen Johnny Carson alive on television,” and members of 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.<sup>11</sup> Their experiences with “born-digital” rather than transcoded-from-analog media, media such as Pixar and other CGI-produced films, video games, MP3s, and YouTube videos, 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 within the past 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.

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: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008).

10 Siva Vaidhyanathan, “Generational Myth,” *The Chronicle Review*, September 19, 2008.

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 the first commercial Web browser, Netscape Navigator, 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 Brunson wrote, “[I]nitially, 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.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet despite the perceived trendiness or “sexiness” of new media, *Cinema Journal* has not simply embraced it as superior to film or television. 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 films 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” but retained their focus on film and television criticism and history.<sup>13</sup>

In 2004, the year after SCMS 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.”<sup>14</sup>

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

11 See “Beloit College Mindset List,” <http://www.beloit.edu/mindset/2009.php> (accessed April 1, 2009). Many thanks to Harriet Green, reference librarian at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, whose ability to identify and locate this Web site showed me that the 1957 film *Desk Set* (Walter Lang) was correct: there is no doubt that librarians outperform computers at research tasks.

12 Charlotte Brunson, “Is Television Studies History?” *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 3 (2008): 128.

13 Doran Larson, “Machine as Messiah: Cyborgs, Morphs, and the American Body Politic,” *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4 (1997): 57–75.

14 Barry Keith Grant, “Diversity or Dilution? Thoughts on Film Studies and the SCMS,” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 3 (2004): 90.

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.<sup>15</sup>

In 2004, James Bennett wrote a blunt appeal to the readership of *Cinema Journal*: “It’s time for television studies to go digital.” He notes that 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.”<sup>16</sup>

Bennett is correct in reminding us that television- (or cinema-) centered methods for studying digital media will not work. Expanding the focus from film and television to born-digital media such as Web sites, 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 fields 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.”<sup>17</sup> The “Human *Tetris*”—style game shows in Japan (*Tonneruzu no Minasan no Okage deshita* [Fuji TV, 2006–present]), Australia (*Hole in the Wall* [Nine Network, 2008–present]), the UK (*Hole in the Wall* [BBC1, 2008–present]), and the US (*Hole in the Wall* [Fox, 2008–present]), among others, represent an unsuccessful extension of video game logics into television reality programming, but also herald a deeper visual shift toward video game conventions. Indeed, these extensions and shifts are *required* as part of the interpretive work and pleasure of viewing the film and television text. While, as Vaidhyathan reminds us, not all kids (or adults) are part

15 Anna Everett, “Click This: From Analog Dreams to Digital Realities,” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 3 (2004): 96.

16 James Bennett, “Television Studies Goes Digital,” *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 3 (2008): 158–165.

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

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. \*

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## Hive-Sourcing Is the New Out-Sourcing: Studying Old (Industrial) Labor Habits in New (Consumer) Labor Clothes

by JOHN T. CALDWELL

*When the tools of production are available to everyone, everyone becomes a producer.*<sup>1</sup>

Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail*

**B**recht, meet *Wired*. We stumble all over ourselves to engage new media, digital platforms, and online fan activities—YouTube, MySpace, critical fan sites, social networks—as a next important stage in cinema and cinema study. Yet in doing so, we may be missing a valuable opportunity. Rather than viewing film and television as one disciplinary chapter being displaced by the “next digital chapter,” film and television can be viewed as resilient organizational cultures that prefigure both participatory media’s *creative relations* and its *social practices*. From this perspective, the industry may help guide online social networks to work their democratic, unruly wonders. This realization may be a tough pill to swallow. Yet I am not cynically dragging the old “industry” warhorse out of the barn as part of a familiar project: to underscore corporate resilience and final advantage. I am not talking about traditional ideas of ideological “recuperation,” that is, where industry serves as the bad guy again hijacking good resistant activities on culture’s fringes. I am instead suggesting that much of the cultural complexity, agency, and sociality we now find in online film and fan

1 Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail* (New York: Hyperion, 2006), 73.