Jeff Watson - Qualifying Exam Research Area Descriptions and Bibliographies (USC iMAP, November 2010)

New Media Spaces

Description: New Media Spaces

The language we use to describe our engagement with new media objects is predominantly spatial. Linearity naturally emerges out of this engagement as we sequence one experience after another, but we begin and transition by "navigating," "searching," "scanning," "browsing," "downloading," "visiting," and any number of other verbs that imply movements across, through, to, from, and around. Further, the increasingly tenuous boundaries between new media objects — where does Google end, and where does the information it indexes begin? — imply a kind of limitless and endlessly reconfigurable hyperspace, one that extends well beyond the confines of the screen and into the hybrid digital/physical spaces that constitute our lived environment. As this mode of engagement becomes dominant, what kinds of changes are we seeing in epistemology, representation, identity, and narrativity? What is newly possible, and what is foreclosed — and for whom? And finally, what are the poetic affordances of this spatiality?

Coming to terms with the many valences of "space" in this context requires a multi-threaded interdisciplinary investigation. The first thread of this investigation looks at space through the lens of twentieth century critical theory and cultural studies (Bachelard, Benjamin, Foucault, Lefebvre, De Certeau). These texts inform an understanding of how space is used as a means of (re-)inscribing and resisting economic and cultural hegemonies; how this use co-constructs, renews, and reshapes meaning; and how these meanings reflect and feed back on the social and economic orders that circumscribe our experience of place. Lurking in the background here are several related spheres of discourse, including intersubjective systems theory; notions of mutualism, multiplicity, and nomadism; and theories of emergence and utopia. The second thread draws on several relatively recent texts examining theories around the phenomenology and epistemology of the spatial modalities inherent in our engagement with new media objects (Aarseth, Hayles, Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, Manovich, McPherson, Vesna). The central metaphors of navigation and database found in these works provide crucial context for the final thread of this research focus, which examines a variety of media artifacts and theories that operate within spatialized engagement modalities, beginning with postwar and late twentieth century critical interventions and theories of play (Nieuwenhuys, Debord, Huizinga), following through the ascendance and praxis of transmedia storytelling and distributed narratives (Bleecker, Jenkins, Walker), and concluding with spatial new media story/play systems such as alternate reality games (Dena, Hon, McGonigal, Szulborski), pervasive games (Montoya, de

Souza e Silva and Sutko), site-specific art movements (Kwon), and social media games.

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History and Theories of Participatory Culture and Art Practice

Description: History and Theories of Participatory Culture and Art Practice

The increasingly "device agnostic" Web constitutes a vast and rapidly evolving multi-modal metaplatform for collaboration, performance, and community-building. The radical reconfiguration of spatial, institutional, and social boundaries that has accompanied and guided the emergence of network technology and social media has brought with it an irreversible decentralization of the production and dissemination of knowledge and culture (Benkler, Von Hippel). The effects of these shifts are only beginning to be felt, with policy makers, educators, cultural theorists, and corporations scrambling to adjust to/capitalize on a broad class of new participatory media practices. But while the breadth and scope of media participation have been vastly increased by the core affordances of new media objects and the dawning ubiquity of network technologies, the defining practices of participatory culture have been with us since long before the birth of YouTube and Web 2.0 (Jenkins). From the amateur operators of the early days of radio (Douglas), to the feminist "vidding" subcultures of the 1970s and 80s (Coppa), our engagement with media has always been just that: engagement, and not pure consumption. Until recently, personal and academic uses of popular culture artifacts — remixing, fan fiction, filesharing — have been largely invisible to the corporate apparatus underwriting their original production; but as amateur creators and remixers have flooded to the Web to share and discuss their works, hitherto "private" practices have become public, much to the chagrin of those with a vested interest in upholding the kinds of scarcity and centralized authority required for the maintenance of the status quo (Lessig).

The present moment is a crucial one in this regard. A failure by policy makers to imaginatively engage with the affordances of the Web could restrict or roll back the transformative potentials promised by the advocates of openness, transparency, and collective intelligence (Levy, O'Reilly). To steer clear of this kind of disaster, it falls to the makers of media — from on- and offline amateurs to corporate department heads — to identify the ways in which new arrangements of cultural authority and economic power, particularly in the realms of intellectual property and knowledge production, might emerge in the context of distributed and procedural authorship. Toward this end, it is essential to develop an understanding of the motivations, pleasures, requirements, effects, and potentials of participation across a variety of domains.

Three closely-related fields of study inform this understanding. Readings from Fan Studies

provide insights into the role of participatory culture in the articulation of identity and resistance, with particular focus on the ways in which fans and producers negotiate, co-create, and contest meanings within the hybrid spaces of canon and taste (Coppa, Fiske, Jenkins). Seminal ethnographic and critical perspectives from cultural studies and social science (De Certeau, Foucault, Goffman) extend these insights beyond fandom and into broader conversations concerning performativity and the uncertain ontological status of the author/viewer divide. Within this context, investigations of the shifting logics of cultural production, circulation, and reputation help to establish frameworks for understanding how new technologies — from amateur printing presses to Web 2.0 — can disrupt existing legal and industrial structures as they give rise to new modes of engagement (Benkler, Berners-Lee, Bruns, Douglas, Green, McPherson, Lessig). Finally, a traversal of the history of avant-garde participatory art practice reveals a range of theories, aesthetic systems, and process-oriented artworks whose legacy constitutes a deep and wide working-through of the myriad theoretical and practical challenges facing contemporary media makers invested in notions of the participatory (Bishop, Boal, Bourriaud, Kaprow, Knabb, Kester, O'Donnell, Ranciere).

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Interaction Design for Social Media and Pervasive Computing

Description: Interaction Design for Social Media and Pervasive Computing

As devices and platforms multiply, so too does the amount of metadata produced by individuals in the course of daily life. This metadata, generated and collected via disparate sources such as social networking profiles, web usage analytics, and physical sensor systems embedded in mobile devices and the built environment, provides interaction designers with rich real-time information flows that model and visualize user behavior.

Understanding how to create responsive and context-aware interactivity based on these dynamic data flows is an imperative for designers working in the field of social media and pervasive computing interaction design. Equally important is an investigation of how participatory activities and games – from social games to ambient alternate reality games to locative artworks to collaborative production games and more – can leverage social media and pervasive computing to exist "inside the flow" of their users' lives, rather than as cordoned-off activities that necessitate a pause or "stepping out" from behavioral norms in order to access. Key readings draw from game design, particularly discussions around so-called "casual" asynchronous play systems (Fullerton, Juul, Salen and Zimmerman); mobile and locative interaction design (Böhlen and Frei, Ermi, Montola, Schell, Vinge); information architecture, pervasive computing, and the internet of things (Benford, Berners-Lee, Bleecker, Kay, Krueger, Montola, Nieuwdorp, Shirky, Sterling); and human-computer interaction design (Csikszentmihalyi, Kuniavsky, Thackara, Ramsey, Simon).

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