

VERNACULAR CREATIVITY AND NEW MEDIA

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Abstract

This study takes a cultural studies approach to investigating the ways in which the articulation of vernacular creativity with digital technologies and the networked cultural public sphere might constitute sites of cultural citizenship. In the thesis, the concept of ‘vernacular creativity’ describes the everyday practices of material and symbolic creativity, such as storytelling and photography, that both predate digital culture and are remediated by it in particular ways.

The first part of thesis, covering Chapters 2 and 3, develops a theoretical framework and cultural history of vernacular creativity in new media contexts. Chapter 2 introduces the idea of vernacular creativity and connects it to cultural studies approaches to participatory media and cultural citizenship. Chapter 3 theorises and historicises the relationships among vernacular creativity, technological innovation and new media literacy, drawing on social constructionist approaches to technology, and discussing concrete examples. The first of these examples is the mass amateurisation of photography in the first half of the twentieth century, as represented by the monopoly of popular photography by Kodak in the United States and beyond. The second is the domestication of personal computing in the second half of the twentieth century, culminating in a discussion of the Apple brand and the construction of an ideal ‘creative consumer’.

The second part of the thesis, covering Chapters 4 and 5, is devoted to the investigation of two major case studies drawn from contemporary new media contexts. The first of these case studies is the photosharing network flickr.com, and the second is the Digital Storytelling movement, structured around collaborative

offline workshops in which participants create short multimedia works based on their biographies and personal images. These case studies are used to explore the ways vernacular creativity is being remediated in contemporary new media contexts, the socio-technical shaping of participation in digital culture, and the implications for cultural citizenship. In Chapter 6, the thesis concludes by suggesting some further implications of the research findings for cultural and media studies approaches to the relations of cultural production and the politics of popular culture.

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Keywords	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures.....	vii
List of Tables	viii
Acknowledgements.....	ix
Statement of Original Authorship	x
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
1. Overview	1
2. Context of the Study.....	2
3. Research Design.....	19
Chapter 2 Vernacular Creativity, Cultural Studies and Cultural Citizenship ..	28
1. The Idea of Vernacular Creativity.....	28
2. Cultural Studies and the Politics of Popular Culture	40
3. Cultural Citizenship and The Networked Public Sphere	54
4. Conclusions	71
Chapter 3 Vernacular Creativity and Technological Change	74
1. Introduction	74
2. Approaches to Culture and Technology.....	77
3. The Socio-Technical Construction of New Media Literacy	85
4. Kodak and the Mass Popularisation of Photography	92
5. Personal Computing, Apple and the ‘Creative Consumer’	103
6. Conclusions	124
Chapter 4 Case Study: The Flickr Photosharing Network	127
1. Introduction	127
2. Overview	129
3. Participation as Play	135
4. Users and Uses	141
5. Technologies and Literacies.....	153
6. Creativity and Aesthetics	168
7. Cultural Citizenship and the Local.....	182
8. Discussion	186
Chapter 5 Case Study: The Digital Storytelling Movement.....	192
1. Introduction	192
2. Overview	196
3. The BBC <i>Capture Wales</i> Model	199
4. QUT Digital Storytelling Projects.....	220
5. Discussion	241

Chapter 6 Conclusion	248
1. Significance of the Study	248
2. Discussion of Findings	249
3. Further Implications and Emerging Questions	256
Bibliography	259

List of Figures

Figure 1: Ross Mayfield’s ‘Power Law of Participation’	12
Figure 2: Bradley Horowitz’s Social Media Pyramid.....	15
Figure 3: Flickr—All time most popular tags	133
Figure 4: Flickr—Explore page	135
Figure 5: ‘Green is Beautiful’ by Cyron	144
Figure 6: David de Groot’s computer room.....	145
Figure 7: ‘Shell on the Beach’ by David de Groot	146
Figure 8: ‘Duck and Zoingo Boingo together’ by Louise.....	147
Figure 9: ‘When I Look’ by Melanie Cook	148
Figure 10: ‘Gatecrashed Drain’ by Mr Magoo ICU.....	150
Figure 11: ‘Once was a Window’ by Shanrosen.....	151
Figure 12: ‘Straightened Perspective’ by Yinyang	152
Figure 13: KGUV <i>Sharing Stories</i> Workshop 2004	229
Figure 14: KGUV <i>Sharing Stories</i> Workshop 2006	232

List of Tables

Table 1: Flickr Users Interviewed.....	142
Table 2: Sample Workshop Schedule	198
Table 3: Participants at first KGUV <i>Sharing Stories</i> workshop	227
Table 4: Participants at second KGUV <i>Sharing Stories</i> workshop.....	230

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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature _____

Date _____

Chapter 1

Introduction

1. Overview

When I began planning this study in 2003, the topic of amateur content creation in new media contexts, while timely, seemed marginal to mainstream industry and policy concerns. Even then though, drawing on ‘natural’ evolution discourses, we were hearing about a ‘tidal wave’, or a ‘flood’ of ‘user-generated content’ that appeared to emerge transparently as a direct result of more powerful, accessible technologies enabling the innately creative nature of human beings to flower.

By now there has been a genuinely participatory turn, not only across web business models, but also in some sectors of government, public service broadcasting and civil society. In some sectors, user-led content creation is seen as a driver of technological take-up by consumer markets; in others, the fragmentation of a common cultural public sphere means that it is an imperative for governments and public service broadcasters to find ways to integrate active community participation as a demonstration of and as a means to civic engagement, however imperfectly that is actually happening.

But if it is true that the figures of the active citizen and the creative consumer are in some sense one and the same thing—that is, that active citizenship and consumer co-creation are no longer separate domains of practice but are caught up in a process of convergence—then both everyday creativity and new media technologies gain a

significance that radically exceed their traditional domains of interest: they may, in fact, represent spaces of hope for cultural citizenship. The task of this thesis is to proceed, with a sense of critical optimism, to get in close to those spaces.

2. Context of the Study

The initial impetus for this study was provoked by what seemed to me at the time to be a surge in hyperbole, or as Woolgar (2002) would have it, ‘cyberbole’ around the ‘democratisation’ of technologies for content creation; combined on my part with a curiosity about what material opportunities for cultural democracy might lie beneath the hype. Driven to a great extent by the growing visibility of weblogs (or ‘blogs’), and by the agendas of bloggers themselves, a prominent thread of this discourse concerns the accessibility of tools for content production and distribution by non-professionals, and the likely impact on the dominance of culture by the mass media. Most frequently, the democratisation of technologies discourse has concerned the impact of blogging on journalism or knowledge production (Bowman & Willis, 2003; Bruns, 2005b). Arguments have appeared that in one way or another suggest that the increased availability and power of digital technologies, combined with the Internet, allow ‘everyone’ to be a media participant, if not producer, and that this is in fact happening. This thesis contributes to a growing body of work that is critical of these revolutionary claims about new media, both utopian and dystopian, and yet aims to do more than critique them—making the transition from grandiloquent *hype* to theoretically and empirically grounded *hope*.

In the period since the commencement of this study, this hyperbole has not decreased—rather it has become so ubiquitous as to be almost banal. The following extract from Trendwatching’s (2004) report on ‘Generation C’ is a paradigmatic example:

[...] the C stands for CONTENT, and anyone with even a tiny amount of creative talent can (and probably will) be part of this not-so-exclusive trend.

So what is it all about? The GENERATION C phenomenon captures the tsunami of consumer generated ‘content’ that is building on the Web, adding tera-peta bytes of new text, images, audio and video on an ongoing basis.

The two main drivers fuelling this trend?

(1) The creative urges each consumer undeniably possesses. We’re all artists, but until now we neither had the guts nor the means to go all out.

(2) The manufacturers of content-creating tools, who relentlessly push us to unleash that creativity, using—of course—their ever cheaper, ever more powerful gadgets and gizmos. Instead of asking consumers to watch, to listen, to play, to passively consume, the race is on to get them to create, to produce, and to participate.

Especially in the early stages of a new media form’s emergence, when the media as a whole is attempting to pin down what it is ‘for’ and what its social implications might be, as Woolgar has argued ‘even the hype about the hype is part of the hype’.

That is, the countering arguments to the celebration of a participatory turn in new media culture, often played out in exactly the same media sites, usually operate within the same frame of debate as the original arguments that they mean to question. For example, if the ‘hype’ suggests that news blogs represent a new and more democratic form of journalism, then the counter-hype will argue that blogs are untrustworthy or biased information sources. But in the early days of academic research and media commentary on blogging, it was less common to find a critique of the shared assumptions underlying these debates. Such a critique might have pointed out that the majority of blogging activities never had anything much to do with journalism in the first place: in fact, the main reasons for keeping a blog given by bloggers surveyed in 2006 were ‘creative expression and sharing personal experiences’ (Lenhart & Fox, 2006).

The hype/counter-hype model of debate around the social impacts of technology can actually forestall productive interventions. Polarised modes of discourse combined with utopian or dystopian visions of the future can blind us to the (often mundane) complexity of what is actually going on. In this thesis, I do not devote very much space to the debunking of hyperbolic claims. Rather than taking one side in a futile struggle between utopian and dystopian visions of a participatory media ‘revolution’, my aim in this thesis is to investigate in some detail the actual practices in contexts where everyday creativity is articulated with developments in digital culture.

Further, Steve Woolgar (2002) argues that time and again, ‘once the hype has died down’, ‘something very like the old existing system re-emerges’, and suggests that ‘the inversion would be very much less marked if the original claims had been more

moderate and cautious' (Woolgar, 2002: 8). In questioning the cyberbole around the idea of 'virtuality', Woolgar (2002) begins from twin 'realities': first, the real growth of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs); second, the reality of the *discourse* around ICTs, resulting in widespread assumption that the growth of ICTs should be understood 'as the impetus for radical changes' (Woolgar, 2002: 1). These realities mean that it is impossible to disregard the terms set for the debate—in Woolgar's case, around the social 'impacts' of ICTs—while at the same time remaining relevant to that debate:

So we need instead to find a way of both retaining the central terms and assumptions of the problem as commonly formulated, and at the same time interrogating them as we proceed with our research. (Woolgar, 2002: 8-9).

For this thesis, that means *engaging* with the concept of 'creativity', and with the idea that more powerful and accessible technologies have the potential to enable 'everyone' to participate in a more open and democratic cultural public sphere; while at the same time, critically investigating concrete and specific instances where such claims are made. By remaining sceptical of utopian and dystopian claims about technology, and investigating concrete examples of its articulation with culture and society, then, it is possible to 'get under the skin of synoptic visions of technological impacts' (Woolgar, 2002: 22), and emerge with 'counter-intuitive', rather than predictable findings. It is therefore important to proceed with an awareness of how expectations are shaped as well as the 'reality' of whether or not those expectations are delivered. For example, Woolgar (2002: 21) provocatively asks, 'How (by

whom and what) have our expectations been so shaped that, for example, the discovery of widespread non-use of the Internet appears striking?’

In 2004, the Pew Internet in Everyday Life project (Lenhart et al., 2004) reported that 44% of Internet users in the United States had created content for the Internet through building or posting to Web sites, creating blogs, and sharing files. Creativity is now seen as part of everyday life for ‘ordinary’ consumers in contemporary capitalist societies. But the implications extend beyond self-expression or individual well-being: user-led content creation and collaboration are increasingly understood as engines of economic and social value creation in the new networks of cultural production (Benkler, 2006; Leadbeater & Miller, 2004). Leadbeater and Miller (2004: 22) view the current surge in non-professional creativity as a ‘new ethic of amateurism’ that ‘could be one of the defining features of developed society’.

Leadbeater and Miller’s ‘ProAms’ are amateurs who are as knowledgeable, skilled, emotionally invested and resourced in particular pursuits as professionals, but who do not derive their main income from these amateur pursuits. This work prefigures the now prevailing argument that amateur or ‘enthusiast’ labour is central and not peripheral to the innovation economy and even to democracy (Benkler, 2006).

John Hartley (2004a) argues that, just as economic value has, in the new economy, drifted along the ‘value chain’ from the producer to the consumer, so too has the source of cultural value (that is, the source of judgements about and interpretation of cultural forms) shifted from cultural elites (critics, academics, and producers) to cultural consumers (audiences, readers, and fans). He further argues that received assumptions about how ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ work are of little use in

understanding this shift. Approaching the reconfiguration of producer-consumer relationships through the lens of the productive media consumer, Jenkins' more recent work on 'convergence culture' exposes fan and game cultures as neither entirely autonomous of the mass media and cultural industries, nor passively dependent on or absorbed into them (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b). Rather, these fields of cultural practice reconfigure the relations between production and consumption, industries and audiences, as well as 'old' and 'new' media. While for the most part the copyright-holders still fiercely protect their intellectual property, there is increased awareness of the benefits of dialogue and inter-creativity between the producers of popular culture and their audiences. One of the most well-known examples of early experiments with proactive fan engagement was the careful cultivation of the online Tolkien fan community from the early stages of production of New Line Cinema's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which incorporated a laissez-faire policy toward fan fiction, fan films and other fan-produced content. Another was the more carefully circumscribed loosening of copyright control represented by Lucasfilm's *Star Wars* fan film competitions (Murray, 2004; Shefrin, 2004).

In game environments particularly, terms like 'co-creators' (Banks, 2002) and 'productive players' (Humphreys, 2005) are increasingly gaining purchase as replacements for 'consumers', 'players', or even 'participants'. These re-configurations force us to consider the 'texts' of new media to be emergent—always in the process of being 'made'; further, 'co-creation' is built around network sociality and the dynamics of community, prompting a reconsideration of the idea of the individual producer or consumer of culture—even as corporate content 'owners' continue, in varying degrees, to assert rights that have their basis in the romantic

notion of the individual creative author (Herman et al., 2006). It is not only the ‘who’ of production that is transformed in contemporary digital culture, but the *how*, as science fiction author and technologist William Gibson proclaims in a *Wired Magazine* essay:

Today’s audience isn’t listening at all. It’s participating. Indeed, ‘audience’ is as antique a term as ‘record,’ the one archaically passive, the other archaically physical. The record, not the remix, is the anomaly today. The remix is the very nature of the digital. (Gibson, 2005)

What Gibson is referring to belongs to the more spectacular end of the DIY media continuum: not only the remixing of music, but also machinima, fan films and video mashups. In the new media context, it is clear that creative fans and productive gamers are early innovators in participatory media. But this study seeks to determine whether it is possible to argue that we are now seeing at least the potential for the ‘diffusion’ of participatory culture such as that represented by fandom and game cultures, so that it is now possible to talk about a mainstreaming of vernacular creativity in spaces not so tightly bound up with commercial popular culture, but also extending out into the flows between offline everyday life and the networked public sphere.

In *The Wealth of Networks*, Yochai Benkler (2006: 299-300) discusses the emergence of user-led content production networks as a ‘new folk culture’ that can contribute to the cultural element of liberal democracy, which he calls ‘cultural

freedom'. For Benkler, the 'plasticity of digital objects' and the transparency of networks combine to make available the repository of twentieth century culture to vernacular reworking, criticism and interpretation within the increasingly visible practices of vernacular digital cultural production:

By comparison to the highly choreographed cultural production system of the industrial information economy, the emergence of a new folk culture and of a wider practice of active personal engagement in the telling and retelling of basic cultural themes and emerging concerns and attachments offers new avenues for freedom. It makes culture more participatory, and renders it more legible to all its inhabitants. (Benkler, 2006: 299-300)

Many of the threads above converge in both the technological and social design features that are imagined, if not described, by what is arguably now the dominant discourse around participatory Internet culture: the idea of 'Web 2.0'. The term was coined by Tim O'Reilly (2005) and functions as both a futuristic buzzword and a description of the real features of some of the most talked-about online services for 'user-generated content'. From the point of view of software development, the term Web 2.0 refers to the perceived 'evolution' of the World Wide Web from a network of static websites serving *content* to *audiences*, toward an integrated computing platform serving interoperable, dynamic web *applications* to *users*. But from a perspective concerned with participatory or convergence culture, the term implies a shift in modes of participation and engagement as well.

There are three important structural transformations from the point of view of cultural participation that are implied by the Web 2.0 model, and the applications and services that can be said to exemplify it. The first of these is the shift from content ‘production’, ‘distribution’ and ‘consumption’ to a convergence of all three, resulting in a hybrid mode of engagement that Axel Bruns (2005a) calls ‘produsage’, defined as ‘the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement.’ Related to this is a shift from ‘user-generated content’ to ‘user-led’ content creation, editing, repurposing and distribution; whereby the users of a given web service increasingly take on leadership roles, and where designers and developers to some extent allow the emergence of communities of practice to shape the culture of the network—even to determine what the web service or online community is ‘for’. This convergence of the formerly discrete ‘points’ along the ‘value chain’ is most clearly exemplified by the Wikipedia, whose users, at least in theory, are simultaneously the producers, users, editors and consumers of the content, leading to ‘network effects’, whereby the more users actively participate in a network, the more valuable it becomes. In addition to the Wikipedia, one of the most frequently cited examples of this is Bit Torrent, which is more efficient and useful the more *productive* users there are (O’Reilly, 2005). The third shift is most clearly represented by MySpace, YouTube and Flickr: the convergence of user-generated content and social software to produce hybrid spaces, examples of which are sometimes described as ‘social media’ (Coates, 2006). It is this third feature of the new networks of cultural production that has the most profound implications for cultural participation, at least in potential, because this shift opens up new and diverse spaces for individuals to engage with a

variety of aesthetic experiences at the same time as their participation contributes to the creation of communities. That is, the significance of 'Web 2.0', from a cultural studies point of view, lies in its potential for a new configuration of the relations between the *aesthetic* and the *social* aspects of culture, developed at a grass-roots level.

Because the model *relies*, not only on 'user-generated content', but also on 'user-led innovation', Web 2.0 developers would ideally like their users to be co-creators, active participants and even good creative 'citizens'. But even though technologies and platforms are available in a physical sense to anyone with a modern PC and an Internet connection, it is becoming apparent that participation in 'user-led' content creation is very uneven: even among those who do participate there are many more lurkers than 'active' participants. Increasingly, this issue is resolved in Web 2.0 business discourse by simply accepting as a 'natural law' that some users will participate more 'actively' than others, and that indeed most web users will only ever be surfers, lurkers, and consumers, even of 'user-generated content', leading to arguments that it is important to design for 'lurkers' and 'passive' users as well as for contributors and 'leaders'.

In discussing the dynamics of participation in social software and online communities at his weblog, social software entrepreneur Ross Mayfield (2006) expressed his model of the continuum of participation in a 'power law' graph (below):

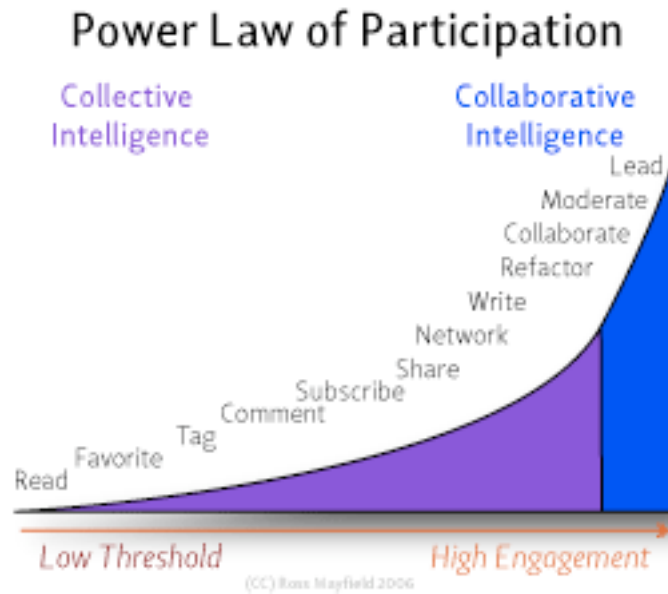


Figure 1: Ross Mayfield’s ‘Power Law of Participation’¹

This is a model of engagement that moves from ‘passive’ consumption through to mastery and control. From a cultural citizenship point of view, is it only the masterful control of new media technologies that is the ideal end-point of the development of creative, collaborative and network literacies, or something else? Secondly, what implications does this ‘common-sense’ model of participation have for theorising the *pay-off* of increased literacy and cultural participation—that is, participation *in what*, and what for? These questions are addressed most succinctly by Henry Jenkins (2006d) in a background document to his Macarthur Foundation white paper (2006c) on the implications of participatory media for education:

Some have suggested that this new media culture should be described as ‘elective,’ suggesting that people can opt in and out of different levels of

¹ This image is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 license. The license can be viewed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>

participation. Roles are adopted and shed easily at least by those who have the access and skills needed to adjust quickly to new communities. Yet, in another sense, it would be wrong to describe these cultures as 'elective.' In so far as participation within them represents a new source of power, wealth, and knowledge, it also represents a new site of privilege and inequality. Participating may be elective for those who have the resources needed to belong in the first place but no such option can be exercised by those who are being left behind. Expanding access to cyberspace has the potential of empowering new segments of the public to become fuller participants in cultural and civic life, yet we can be concerned by the ability of these electronic technologies to render invisible anyone who is not able to participate. (Jenkins, 2006d)

Creative consumer hype, invoking the technological sublime, constructs the tools themselves as reified 'magical solutions'. This shallowly utopian perspective correlates in philosophical terms to the model of lack represented by technologically deterministic 'have-or-have-not' concepts like 'the digital divide'. The technological determinism that underpins dominant 'digital divide' discourses is evident, for example, in Nicholas Negroponte's 'one laptop per child' program as a solution to digital divide and poverty issues in developing countries. The project's website asserts that the laptop, still in development, will be 'a flexible, ultra low-cost, power-efficient, responsive, and durable machine with which nations of the emerging world can leapfrog decades of development—immediately transforming the content and

quality of their children's learning.'² With Warschauer (2003), I argue that 'digital inclusion' is a much more useful term of critique and analysis than 'digital divide', which implies a binaristic and linear model of access, rather than a complex ecosystem of privilege, access and participation. In their discussion of the relationship between digital participation and citizenship, Murdock & Golding (2004) likewise argue that the 'access' model of the digital divide obscures the uneven distribution of social and cultural capital that contributes significantly to digital exclusion. It is important to re-examine our ideas about 'computer literacy' in this context: creative ICT literacy, which is dealt with more fully in Chapter 3, describes the ability to create and manipulate multimedia content in ways that that serve vernacular interests and enable relatively autonomous cultural participation, including playful participation not predominantly structured around 'information' exchange or formal education outcomes.

By contrast, in the discourse produced by Web 2.0 evangelism there is, perhaps unsurprisingly, little evidence of any concern with precisely which social identity groups are most likely to be equipped with the technological and cultural mastery to be the most active content creators and collaborative innovators, and which social identity groups are likely to be 'passive' participants, or not to participate at all. It is not that barriers to participation do not matter, simply that the barriers are thought to be technological or design issues, rather than complex social and cultural ones. Users are socially undifferentiated and generally reduced to their *behaviour* in relation to

² See <http://www.laptop.org/>

content, technology or platform—they are categorised as ‘creators’, ‘synthesizers’ or ‘consumers’. In a blog entry on the topic of whether social media ‘will scale’, Bradley Horowitz of Yahoo! provided an image of a ‘pyramid’ whose levels, he says, represent ‘phases of value creation’ (Horowitz, 2006):

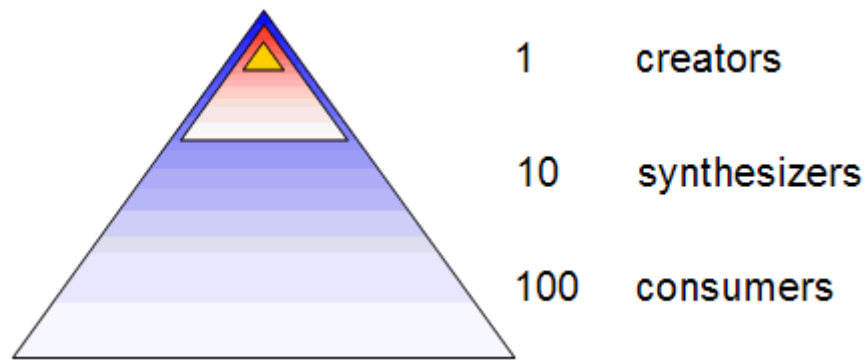


Figure 2: Bradley Horowitz’s Social Media Pyramid

Using the example of Yahoo! Groups, Horowitz explains:

1% of the user population might start a group (or a thread within a group)

10% of the user population might participate actively, and actually author content whether starting a thread or responding to a thread-in-progress

100% of the user population benefits from the activities of the above groups (lurkers)

Up to this point in the article, Horowitz is merely describing what is now becoming ‘common knowledge’ in discussions of the participation gap (Jenkins, 2006a: 23) in online culture. But when he goes on to discuss the *implications* of the unevenness of participation, it is clear that it is the benefit to the user community ‘as a whole’ that

is the concern. Further, as long as the ‘value’ of the service remains high, uneven participation is not a concern:

There are a couple of interesting points worth noting. The first is that we don’t need to convert 100% of the audience into ‘active’ participants to have a thriving product that benefits tens of millions of users. In fact, there are many reasons why you wouldn’t want to do this. The hurdles that users cross as they transition from lurkers to synthesizers to creators are also filters that can eliminate noise from signal. Another point is that the levels of the pyramid are containing—the creators are also consumers.

The use of the ‘signal to noise ratio’ metaphor is telling: for Horowitz and the kind of thinking around business and design imperatives his argument represents, a silent majority of ‘lurkers’ may actually be a precondition of high-quality content rising to the top. Horowitz goes on to the stark declaration that, ‘social software sites don’t require 100% active participation to generate great value.’ He does add that he is ‘a huge believer in removing obstacles and barriers to entry that preclude participation’, but clearly sees these obstacles and barriers as a usability design issue, and not a cultural or social one:

One of the reasons I think Flickr is so compelling is that both the production and consumption is so damn easy. I can (and do) snap photos and upload them in about 15s on my Treo 650. And I can, literally in a moment, digest what my friends did this weekend on my Flickr ‘Photos from Your Contacts’ page. Contrast this with the

production/consumption ratio of something like video or audio or even text. There is something instantly gratifying about photos because the investment required for both production/consumption is so small and the return is so great.

Likewise, the article on ‘participation inequality’ by web usability expert Jakob Nielsen (2006a) is worth discussing because of his reasonably significant influence in the web design and technology blog worlds. In his article, Nielsen reproduces the assumption that inequality is a ‘natural law’. Under the headline ‘How To Overcome Participation Inequality’, Nielsen writes, ‘You can’t’:

The first step to dealing with participation inequality is to recognize that it will always be with us. It’s existed in every online community and multi-user service that has ever been studied.

The inequality of participation matters, says Nielsen, not because it is unfair or undemocratic, but mainly because it skews the demographics of the user base in ways that will negatively impact on the accuracy of search results, marketing and advertising (that is, because the most active and visible users are not representative of the population as a whole):

Participation inequality is not necessarily unfair because “some users are more equal than others” to misquote *Animal Farm*. If lurkers want to contribute, they are usually allowed to do so.

The problem is that the overall system is not representative of Web users. On any given user-participation site, you almost always hear from the same 1% of users, who almost certainly differ from the 90% you

never hear from.

To be fair, elsewhere Nielsen (2006b) discusses the idea of an ‘empowerment divide’ which has literacy aspects, and which, he argues, have not received enough attention to date. However, even in making this argument, he constructs the unequal skills and capacities of *individual users* as the underlying cause of digital inequality; an inequality that can be addressed through designing for usability. That is, there are ways of designing websites and web services so that the participation curve is less steep, including making it ‘easier to contribute’ (e.g. with one-click features); making participation a ‘side effect’ of something else users are doing, rather than a special effort; offering users the opportunity to edit existing content and templates, rather than starting from scratch; and rewarding participation, without over-rewarding the 4% of users that are most active, and thereby encouraging them to dominate even more.

All of Nielsen’s suggestions of best practice in designing for maximum participation may indeed be very useful, but his and Horowitz’s perspectives on the issue betray the fact that the *social and ethical* aspects of participation in new media environments receive very little attention in the discourses of participation emanating from the industries that benefit from them. It is precisely these aspects of the ‘continuum of participation’ that are the required concerns of a cultural studies approach to participatory media with any claim to an interest in the dynamics of cultural inclusion and exclusion.

3. Research Design

This thesis seeks to contribute to knowledge about the relationships among vernacular creativity, new media and cultural participation. It aims to critically investigate the potential for digital technologies designed around amateur creativity to increase cultural participation for ‘ordinary’ people. Building on past cultural studies work on participatory media but situating it in the emergence of and social shaping of specific new media forms, this study investigates the possibilities of new media beyond fandom and game cultures into the mainstream: without reinstating old binary oppositions between active producers and passive consumers, cultural production is repositioned as part of the everyday life of the citizen-consumer.

The thesis is guided by the following overall research question:

How are the everyday practices of vernacular creativity remediated in new media contexts, and with what implications for cultural participation and cultural citizenship?

In this thesis, I take a cultural studies approach to the investigation of the question. The implications of a cultural studies approach go beyond the range of theoretical and conceptual frameworks that can be brought to bear on the questions, and have deep implications for research practice.

As a research tradition, cultural studies is ideally placed to intervene in the debates around the ‘democratisation’ of technologies. As Morris and Frow (2000: 321) argue, if nothing else, cultural studies has been ‘shaped as a response to the social uptake of communications technologies in the second half of the 20th century’ (and

now, the 21st) and that it is ‘deeply concerned with the transformations wrought by this uptake’. Second, everyday life and ‘grassroots’ cultural and media production have long been a site of both optimism and contestation for cultural studies, but now, at a moment when the ‘creative consumer’ is seen as both a key to the new economy and a major potential disruption to the dominance of commercial media (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Leadbeater & Miller, 2004; Lessig, 2001, 2004), there is now more justification than ever to focus on the everyday practices of vernacular creativity. Indeed, Anna McCarthy (2006: 49) argues that it is cultural studies’ ‘methodological insistence on situating knowledge production within the concrete, small-scale world of everyday life’ that ensures its continued relevance.

The conceptual frameworks and ethics of cultural studies generate a particular set of problematics around the topic, central to which are questions of structure and agency—in relation to media power, for ‘ordinary’ people. These questions around democracy and citizenship, cultural and technological change, and the politics of the popular arguably pervade almost all significant cultural studies work since its beginnings, and continue to generate productive tensions. These underlying questions require particular choices to be made: about the appropriate objects of study, and about the array of methods that are appropriate to interrogating those objects. For this study, the methods used can be categorised as belonging to three primary modes that have frequently been combined in cultural studies research: participant observation, textual analysis and what might be loosely called industry analysis—that is, attention has been paid to the economic and social conditions of cultural production that constitute the contexts in which vernacular creativity intersects with new technologies. The study was structured around a dialogue

between theoretical exploration and qualitative empirical research, including participant observation, interviews with key participants, discourse analysis, archival research, and textual analysis.

The thesis is divided into two sections. The first section, which covers Chapters 2 and 3, provides the theoretical, historical and disciplinary context for the research question, building a theoretical model of the ways in which vernacular creativity might be a potential site of expanded cultural citizenship in contemporary contexts of technological change, and what the constraints on this potential might be. Chapter 2 establishes the key theoretical precursors and scope of 'vernacular creativity'. It establishes the disciplinary orientation to the key questions of the study, connecting the idea of vernacular creativity to cultural studies approaches to participatory media and cultural citizenship, concluding by proposing that vernacular creativity in new media contexts represents a 'space of hope' for contemporary practices of cultural citizenship.

Chapter 3 theorises and historicises the relationships among vernacular creativity, technological change and the politics of new media literacy. I 'go in close' to the problem by historicising the question of how technological change has transformed everyday cultural participation, drawing on key paradigmatic examples. The first of these examples is the mass amateurisation of photography in the first half of the twentieth century, as represented by the monopoly of popular photography by Kodak in the United States and beyond. The second of these examples is the domestication of personal computing in the second half of the twentieth century, culminating in a particularly revealing example of the contemporary construction of the relationship

of the ‘creative consumer’ to technology: the Apple brand and the construction of an ideal ‘user’, as represented in a detailed analysis of the Apple iLife suite of ‘creative’ software. The material for this part of the study consisted partly of secondary sources, as well as several magazine and television advertisements, promotional materials, and the texts produced by the online Apple ‘brand community’. I also treated the visual interface of the software included in the Apple iLife suite as a text that could be analysed in order to draw out key themes in Apple’s socio-technical construction of the ideal user, and included reflections on my own experience using the software.

Informed by the theoretical insights developed in Chapters 2 and 3, the overall research question, ‘How are the everyday practices of vernacular creativity remediated in new media contexts, and with what implications for cultural participation and cultural citizenship?’ is broken down into four questions that can be addressed by exploration of two concrete case studies drawn from contemporary new media contexts:

1. What are the characteristics, affordances and constraints of the new media technologies and platforms that are marketed to and used by ‘ordinary people’ to produce, distribute and consume creative content?
2. In what ways do these technologies and platforms remediate the everyday practices of vernacular creativity?
3. Who is using these technologies and platforms, in what contexts, and what uses are being made of them?

4. Does the practice of vernacular creativity in new media contexts constitute the practice of cultural citizenship, and if so, in what form, and for whom?

The first of these case studies is the photosharing website flickr.com. The second is the Digital Storytelling movement, structured around collaborative offline workshops in which participants create short multimedia works based on their biographies and personal images. Flickr was selected because it was clearly paradigmatic of 'Web 2.0' models of 'architectures of participation' for vernacular creativity, and because it was one of the most frequently discussed of these models in Web 2.0 discourse when the study was in the planning and early implementation phases, in 2004-2005. The other case study, the Digital Storytelling movement, was selected because at the time it was also clearly gaining a great deal of momentum as a platform for vernacular creativity; however, it operates in some ways in parallel to the model of participatory media that dominates online culture. It operates mostly 'offline', and articulates not to Internet culture and the 'web 2.0' model, but rather to public service broadcasting, community media, and civil society. The case studies are therefore relevant to the 'puzzles' derived from the intersection of the theoretical perspectives brought to bear on the research question (Mason, 1996: 93-94; Silverman, 2000: 105-06). They are not intended as 'tests' for a theoretically derived hypothesis or assertion, but nor are they of interest in and of themselves. Rather, they function as ways of 'getting in close' to the problematics set up by the conceptual framework of the dissertation—the problematics of 'vernacular creativity' itself, how it might be transformed by and through digital technologies, and the ways in which the practice of vernacular creativity might also constitute the practice of cultural citizenship. The mode of analysis undertaken across the case

studies is comparative to some extent to provide the basis, not of generalisation, but of ‘extrapolation’ (Alasuutari, 1995: 155-56).

Within each of these case studies, the emphasis in cultural studies on relations and contexts rather than discrete ‘objects’ of study demands the use of multiple methods; not in the naïve hope of arriving at a complete picture, but in order to examine thoroughly and critically the points at which those relations and contexts intersect with the research problem (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Silverman, 2000).

Following Fielding and Fielding’s (1986) ‘ground rules’ for the triangulation of multiple methods, this approach retains coherence because it is driven by a common overall analytical framework, and because the methods chosen are appropriate to that framework.

The need for analytical models that go beyond the ‘industry-text-audience’ triangulation model of much media studies research (cf. Cunningham & Turner, 2006) is starkly obvious in the context of this study. This is because: first, ‘vernacular producers’ are at the same time consumers of technologies, software, and Internet services; second, content-based media businesses (whether web-based or broadcasters) increasingly integrate ‘user-generated content’ as part of their textual production; and third, content is both produced and circulates in peer-to-peer networks, not of ‘consumers’, but of ‘producers’ (Bruns, 2005a). Rather than reject the industry-text-audience model entirely, the material of the two major case studies in this thesis is organised according to an analogous tripartite structural logic. In both cases, I begin with the design or *provider ideology*, to investigate what forms of vernacular creativity, and what modes of participation, are invited, and how those

modes of participation are technologically and socially shaped in each context. I then move on to a focus on social identities, *creative practices* and modes of participation. The third area of analytical focus is the formation of publics or *social networks*, both ‘within’, and spiralling out from, each of the two contexts of practice. This structure remains implicit and ecological rather than explicit or categorical, and at times the discussion flows back and forth between the three focus points.

The case study of Flickr is grounded in over two years of participant observation, including exploration of and direct participation in the Flickr network, as well as research into the discursive framing of Flickr as a Web 2.0 ‘architecture of participation’ in the blogosphere and other authoritative sites of web commentary. I joined the network myself in 2004, and began uploading my own images, adding contacts to my profile, leaving comments on other members’ images, and responding to comments on my own images. My Flickr images were often cross-posted to my weblog, which was the hub of my online research practice as well as the locus of my participation in ‘DIY’ web culture. I joined several interest groups within Flickr, but concentrated my explicit research efforts on two: The Brisbanites group (for photographs taken in Brisbane) and the Brisbane Meetup group (used for organising offline photographic excursions and social occasions, and sharing photographs of these events). In order to develop an understanding of the ways in which people were integrating Flickr into their everyday lives and their photographic practice, from among the members of these two local groups, I recruited seven participants with whom I conducted extended interviews, for the most part at their homes. I also undertook two field trips to offline Flickr meetups in Brisbane, which were also attended by several of the participants who I had interviewed. Chapter 4 presents the

findings of this case study. It begins with an overview of the design and business model of the service to establish the modes of participation that are invited, before proceeding to an extended discussion of the uses made of the network by the seven users who participated in interviews.

As with the Flickr network, I studied the Digital Storytelling movement from both ‘inside’ and ‘out’, from the multiple perspectives of participant, trainer, cultural critic and observer. In 2004, I participated in a ‘train-the-trainers’ workshop conducted at Queensland University of Technology by Daniel Meadows, who was Creative Director of the BBC *Capture Wales* Digital Storytelling project. This experience in many ways represented an introduction into the dominant or at least normative model of Digital Storytelling practice, particularly outside the United States. In order to follow up on the particular ways in which this model of Digital Storytelling constructs vernacular creativity and cultural citizenship, I undertook a field trip to the UK, where I observed a *Capture Wales* Digital Storytelling workshop and interviewed Daniel Meadows and team member Gareth Morlais. Back in Australia, I worked in several Digital Storytelling workshops—as a co-facilitator for some of the Youth Internet Radio Network project workshops, and as lead facilitator in the Kelvin Grove Urban Village *Sharing Stories* project. These two projects were both interdisciplinary research projects undertaken at QUT with industry and government partners, and included reflective practice components as well as focus groups and interviews with individual participants. As well as affording the opportunity to gather detailed knowledge about individual participants and their stories, these projects allowed me to reflect on the implications of articulating Digital Storytelling to particular economic and social contexts. Chapter 5

presents the findings of the Digital Storytelling case study. It begins with an overview of the history and ideologies of the movement, before moving on to three contexts of use: the BBC *Capture Wales* project, the Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN), and the Kelvin Grove Urban Village *Sharing Stories* project, gradually shifting focus from ‘provider ideology’ in the discussion of *Capture Wales*, through to social identities and the remediation of everyday creative practice in YIRN, and the formation of social networks through the practice of Digital Storytelling in the discussion of KGUV *Sharing Stories*.

In the concluding chapter, I discuss the findings of both case studies, suggesting their implications for the ‘uses’ of vernacular creativity in new media contexts, for new media literacy and for cultural citizenship.

Chapter 2

Vernacular Creativity, Cultural Studies and Cultural Citizenship

I write about things that appear in art galleries, and other bona fide art contexts. I do not write about crop circles. I do not write about the kind of sculptures that people make from junk and put in their front gardens. I do not write about painted eggs, decorated cakes, floral arrangements, sandcastles, snowmen, guys, scarecrows, fairground signs, trade-union banners, demonstrators' placards, houses covered in Christmas decorations, shop displays, roadside memorials to car victims, carnival floats, community murals, drawings on the backs of dirty vans, graffiti, tattoos, ornamented crash helmets, home-made shrines to Elvis and Di, topiary, bottle-top mosaics, or lost-cat notices pinned to trees. I do not write about these things, however well they are done. But now, for one week only, I will. (Lubbock, 2005)

1. The Idea of Vernacular Creativity

The quotation that opens this chapter comes from Tom Lubbock's (2005) review of *Folk Archive: Contemporary Popular Art from the UK*, a travelling exhibition of contemporary folk art, also variously referred to by Lubbock as 'vernacular culture' and 'popular art'. The rich evocativeness of this list and indeed the need to provide a list in the first place are telling. This is because there is no satisfactory way of arriving at a definition, even when such a familiar term as 'folk art' is used to refer

to everyday cultural production. As Lubbock implies, ‘art’ is what the art world says it is—it is constituted as a category via the symbolic boundary-work of concrete institutions. But the contexts of folk art, as well as what I choose to call ‘vernacular creativity’ are not so clearly defined—the domain of vernacular creativity is the everyday, the mundane, and the in-between.

In settling on the term ‘vernacular creativity, my intention is not to create neologisms for their own sake, but to find a *way of looking* at everyday cultural production that makes sense in the context of contemporary transformations in culture and new media technologies. There are other available terms, but as a concept, vernacular creativity has significant advantages. For example, it would be natural enough to simply use the term ‘amateur content creation’ to describe the cultural practices this thesis discusses in detail; but this familiar language glosses over, rather than helps us to map, new territory. This is because ‘amateur’ is always appended as an adjective to some pre-existing field of cultural practice—music, photography—when in the context that the phrase appears, ‘professional’ is the default but exnominated status of the activity, hence the need for the qualifier ‘amateur’. The idea of ‘vernacular creativity’ is a centre of gravity in relation to new configurations of the aesthetic and the social that are most sharply realised in the context of new media. That is, new configurations of the *fields* of cultural production in the context of new media, for which ‘art’ ‘folk’ and ‘popular’, as well as ‘artist’, ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ are inadequate; and new configurations of the *relations* of cultural production for which ‘producer’ ‘audience’ and ‘consumer’ are inadequate. However ‘vernacular creativity’ is not so much a neologism as it is an

achieved concept: it marries two ordinary words that cut across several domains of culture.

The most familiar meaning of the term ‘vernacular’ is that of vernacular speech, thought, or expression, usually applied to the ‘native’ speech of a populace as against the official language. It was used, for example, to denote English in the Middle Ages—where, to be precise, ‘vernacular’ didn’t merely mean ‘English’; it meant not-Latin, and so not-learned. ‘Vernacular’, then, was the language of folk, magical or superstitious knowledges, rather than the language of literacy. The term is now used primarily to distinguish ‘everyday’ from institutional or official modes of expression within the same language. Beyond linguistic expression, there is vernacular architecture—an ‘architecture of the people’—characterised by buildings that are customarily owner- or community-built, or whose style represents ‘low’ or ‘folk’ culture rather than institutionalised or ‘high’ architecture. While in ‘developing’ communities the emphasis is on buildings that utilise available or traditional, rather than imported, resources and methods (Brunskill, 2000; Oliver, 1997), in the United States, the term ‘vernacular’ (whether for architecture, art, or music) is used to refer to either African-American, ‘self-taught’, or traditional (‘folk’) culture, marking a distinction between the ‘legitimate’ cultural practices of dominant or hegemonic cultures, and the ‘outsider art’ of minority or subordinate groups. Because of this heritage, the term at first glance appears to constitute a category of cultural practice with strong class overtones, but I do not mean it this way. Like the folklore scholar Roger D. Abrahams (2005), who uses the concept of ‘vernacular culture’ to develop a poetics of everyday talk and performance that cuts across both ‘high’ and ‘low’

culture, it is the ordinary *everydayness* of the vernacular that makes it a powerful concept for the purposes of the present study.

In *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular*, Thomas McLaughlin (1996) has also employed the term as a call to recognize the legitimacy and specificity of the philosophical frameworks and knowledges of non-elite Western cultures in concrete contexts, a strategy he has put into practice across a number of case studies. For example, according to McLaughlin, any critical theorist who wants to understand the workings of power relations within the institutions of Western medicine might do well to engage doctors and nurses in a critical dialogue about the issue. For McLaughlin, those with vernacular knowledge are not outside of theory—subjects to be observed by the knowing critical theorist; rather, they are the insiders—thinking subjects operating within specific contexts and working to construct *vernacular* knowledge systems that operate in dialogue with ‘official’ discourses.

The category of ‘vernacular photography’ has seen a recent increase in both popular and curatorial interest. The cultural work that this term does in increasing the visibility and legitimacy of particular forms of vernacular photographic practice resonates on several levels with my use of the term ‘vernacular creativity’. It is also substantively relevant, not only because this study engages in depth with the online photo-sharing website *Flickr* as a major case study, but also because of the way that attempts to pin down vernacular photography reveal the contingency of categories of cultural practice *outside* the symbolic boundaries of official art worlds.

Geoffrey Batchen (2002) defines vernacular photography in the following way:

The term 'vernacular' literally means the ordinary and ubiquitous but it also refers to qualities specific to particular regions or cultures. Its attachment to the word 'photography' allows historians like myself to argue for the need to devise a way of representing photography's history that can incorporate all its many manifestations and functions. A vernacular history of photography will have to be able to deal with the kind of hybrid objects I describe above, but also with, for example, photographs from outside Europe and the U.S. It may mean having to adopt non-traditional voices and narrative structures. It will certainly mean abandoning art history's evaluation system (based on masterpieces and masters, originality and innovation, and so on). In short, the term 'vernacular photography' is intended as a provocation and a challenge. (Batchen, 2002)

Based on this range of uses, then, the word vernacular captures several important qualities of everyday creative practice. As with vernacular photography, speech or architecture, vernacular creativity is ordinary. There is also a dual meaning of 'ordinariness' in Batchen's definition of vernacular photography that I mean quite deliberately to capture. Vernacular creativity, in being ordinary, is not elite or institutionalised; nor is it extraordinary or spectacular, but rather is identified on the basis of its *commonness*. On the other hand, just as particular vernacular verbal expressions are indigenous to their temporal, social and geographic contexts, particular forms of vernacular creativity are grounded in contextual *specificity*. Indeed, as Anna McCarthy (2006) notes, from Raymond Williams' famous (1958) statement that 'culture is ordinary' to Richard Hoggart's (1957) *The Uses of Literacy*

and beyond, the uses of ‘the ordinary’ in cultural studies have always captured this apparently contradictory duality. McCarthy (2006: 34) writes that ‘ordinariness’ has designated both ‘the embodiment of concreteness’ in describing ‘the sediment of practices that make up everyday life on the small scale of lived experience’ and the very large category of things that were not extraordinary or special (literally, ‘out of the ordinary’), and therefore not rare or scarce. This large-scale sense of ordinariness has been captured by the political rhetoric of conservative populism in Australia and elsewhere, most notably by Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s counter-multicultural and anti-intellectual appeals to ‘ordinary Australians’ (Gregg, 2007). In Howard’s use of the term, it actually means ‘normal’ and ‘mainstream’; an exnominated white ‘middle Australia’. But it does not follow from the conflation of ‘ordinariness’ with monocultural normativity that cultural studies should give up on the idea of the ordinary (Gibson, 2001; Hartley, 1999: 16), or to substitute French theories of ‘the everyday’ in its place (Gregg, 2007). Rather, it is the promise of an ordinariness structured by specificity and diversity that has allowed queer and indigenous authors to claim the *right to be ordinary* for minority groups (McKee, 1998, 1999; Mickler, 1998).

Precisely because of the rich meanings of both ‘everyday life’ and the ‘ordinary’ as I use them here, it is important to establish that I am not using the term ‘vernacular’ in order to create an aura of authenticity or purity around the creative practices and practitioners that are the object of study. Based on cultural studies scholarship, I understand vernacular creativity to be bound up with, not separate from, popular consumption and engagement with popular culture. Additionally, while the domain of vernacular creativity is everyday life and not the institutions of ‘official culture’ or

the production end of the creative industries, at the same time it often operates with reference to the values, aesthetics and techniques of established creative professions and art worlds (Howard, 2005). In his call for a 'vernacular theory of photography' Batchen (2001: 59) discusses the relations between vernacular photography and 'proper photography'. In doing so he emphasises the vernacular as official art history's 'other':

Vernacular photography is the absent presence that determines its medium's historical and physical identity; it is that thing that decides what proper photography is not. Truly to understand photography and its history, therefore, one must closely attend to what that history has chosen to repress. Moreover, by reminding us of the differences within photography, vernaculars insist that there are many photographies, not just one, indicating a need for an equally variegated array of historical methods and rhetorics. In other words, vernacular photographies demand the invention of suitably vernacular histories.

Batchen's argument that vernacular photography has to be theorised from the inside is tremendously useful. But as Fine's (2003; 2004) work on the ideology of authenticity in the construction of symbolic boundaries around 'self-taught art' reminds us, it is important that attempts to imagine, describe or celebrate the forms and practices of 'vernacular creativity' do not at the same time contribute to the drawing up of boundaries which result in its symbolic exclusion from the domain of 'real' creativity, and therefore the perpetuation of the existing order of cultural legitimacy. Further, such distinctions are unproductively artificial: as I discuss later, the boundaries between vernacular creativity and art or commercial mass media are, in practice, consistently permeable and transitory.

While the first half of the phrase 'vernacular creativity'—the 'vernacular'—is used in a deliberate and focused way and at the same time is relatively uncontroversial, the second half of the term—'creativity'—is both utterly ubiquitous and fiercely contested as to the proper scope of its legitimate usage in contemporary culture. Thomas Osborne (2003) argues that the appropriation of the concept of creativity by business and new age discourse—that is, creativity as a cognitive process that is universally available to all spheres of human activity and that can be cultivated by managers—has rendered it useless, at least from a progressive standpoint, and that its ubiquity as a social and cultural norm leads to conservatism, implying 'compulsory individualism, compulsory "innovation", compulsory performativity and productiveness, the compulsory valorisation of the putatively new' (Osborne, 2003: 507). More broadly, the debates around creativity primarily centre around evaluative questions: is this or that object or practice sufficiently culturally valuable

based on its level of innovation to be considered ‘creative’? In this thesis, I do not use ‘creativity’ in this evaluative sense; rather, I use it in the most banal possible way: that is, ‘creativity’ simply describes the processes by which cultural objects, texts and performances are made. However, while it is not the goal of this study to *make* evaluative judgements about either creativity or aesthetics, the ways in which particular constructions of creativity and aesthetics appear to be *operating*, in particular social contexts, are of vital interest because of the way they contribute to the shaping of norms of participation, and because of the way they can contribute to social inclusion and exclusion. Although this thesis does not contribute directly to the debates around creativity, the need for conceptual tools to discuss the way creativity and cultural value are constructed and contested in new media contexts means that I do need to at least map the contours of the debate. The dominant discourses of creativity that flow through these debates inevitably affect the social meanings ascribed to any creative practice that reaches a public, and so even the most mundane practices of vernacular creativity in new media contexts operate, albeit often implicitly, in relation to them.

Within cultural studies, the construction of creativity as an exceptional process resulting in aesthetically exceptional cultural forms has long been rejected on the basis that, firstly, it reifies cultural production; that is, on the basis that, far from proceeding magically from the mind of an author or creator, cultural artefacts must be understood as being imbricated with the material contexts and social networks in which they emerge and circulate (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1993). Secondly, the evaluation of creative products on the basis of their exceptional qualities (as against the mundane or merely utilitarian qualities of the mass popular) has been a key

mechanism in the modern process of cultural evaluation that contributes to the normalisation—indeed, the constitution—of class hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984; Frow, 1995; Storey, 2003). Questions of cultural value are inseparable from traditional high-culture discourses around creativity. Writing in the *Guardian Review* as recently as 2002, Grayling lists the following markers of ‘quality’ creative practice: ‘fineness of observation, skill in production, psychological acuity, wit, insight and inventiveness’ (Grayling, 2002).

Grounded in cultural studies, Negus and Pickering’s (2004) contribution to the question traces the changing meaning and uses of the concept of ‘creativity’ through its various incarnations in Western thought—most relevant is the argument that fundamentally, cultural creativity (i.e. in music, film, television, visual art, or fiction) is a matter of social communication, not abstract aesthetic value. That is, available cultural resources (including both ‘material’ resources—content; and immaterial resources—genre conventions, shared histories, and so on) are recombined in novel ways, so that they are both recognisable because of their familiar elements, and create affective impact through the innovative process of this recombination. My approach is equally informed by social-interactionist accounts of cultural production, especially Howard Becker’s study of ‘art worlds’ (1982). For Becker, creativity is always to be understood as grounded in complex networks of social practice, collaboration and negotiation. Negus and Pickering (2004) argue that Becker’s focus on the interaction between social actors in creative networks goes too far in this direction and too far away from individual creativity. However, the authors do acknowledge that the forms of creativity built around the ‘recreation’ of traditions (as in the oral transmission and evolution of folk song or folk tales) are always

synchronously and diachronically collaborative, rather than a product of individual genius.

Negus and Pickering's project overall is to reclaim some of the connotations of creativity associated with the artistic canon without restricting it to high culture. They refuse to dismiss the category of the 'exceptional' merely because, in the past, it has tended to be restricted in its application to the products and producers of high culture. Rather, their argument is that revisiting concepts such as transcendence and genius is necessary in order to understand how some cultural artefacts create moments of intense and lasting impact—in other words, their concern is finally with the reception, and not the production, of creative moments (Negus & Pickering, 2004: 147-49). However, their understanding of the impact of creativity is not restricted to aesthetic formalism or rational evaluation, but combines affective, visceral and rational responses:

Our feelings are engaged, sympathies awoken, bodies moved and our taken-for-granted ways of thinking are transferred as they are stimulated by a specific form, artefact or product from a quite particular time and place. (Negus & Pickering, 2004: 161)

According to this framework then, there is no reason that the originating location of epiphanic moments of 'exceptional' creativity could not be the equally particular realm of everyday cultural practice; of 'ordinary' creativity.

In thinking about how a politics of ordinary creativity might articulate with the ‘democratisation’ of technologies, Chris Atton’s (2001) article on the representation of the mundane in personal homepages is a significant step forward. This is because it disarticulates the spectacular and the radical from the concept of alternative media, redrawing the field to include everyday cultural production and therefore ‘ordinary’ cultural producers in the field of alternative media studies:

What happens when ‘ordinary’ people produce their own media? I want to explore some aspects of ‘popular’ media production and its intersection with everyday life. To do so will be to [...] take the notion of ‘everyday production’ and its place in identity-formation to a different place: to that of the originating producer within everyday life. Popular media production might then be considered a primary form of everyday cultural production. (Atton, 2001: n.p.)

The central placement of the politics of ordinary participation through everyday cultural production shapes our concerns toward access, self-representation, and literacy, rather than resistance or aesthetic innovation. This approach also preserves the distinction between the everyday (as signifier of a particular form of mundanity, viewed from above by the privileged cultural critic or artist) and the specific dignity of ordinary lives, expressed using vernacular communicative means.

2. Cultural Studies and the Politics of Popular Culture

It is often repeated that (British) cultural studies was shaped around a concern with both understanding and dignifying 'ordinary' people's lived experiences and cultural practices, and that mass-mediated popular culture was seen as a site of negotiation and political potential. This perspective on the relationship between mass-mediated culture and the agency of its consumers is particularly marked in work that can be placed within the 'active audience' tradition and has been reflected in a particular interest in fans as visible proof of such activity. But fandom has been constructed by cultural studies as a somewhat *extraordinary* mode of engagement with the products of the mass media (see for example Grossberg, 1992). In the work of John Fiske and earlier Henry Jenkins from the late 1980s and early 1990s the most distinctive qualities of fandom were not its objects of choice but its psychological intensity and textual productivity, as against the more casual and passive forms of consumption associated with the ordinary media audience.

John Fiske (1992) outlines the characteristics that distinguish fandom from 'ordinary' audiences, before going on to argue that fandom is a 'shadow cultural economy' which operates outside of, but necessarily in relation to, the culture industries. For Fiske, fandom is: exclusively associated with popular culture; distinct from 'normal' audienceing; and associated with denigrated genres and forms, and therefore with the cultural tastes of 'subordinated formations of the people' (Fiske, 1992: 30). Fandom encompasses both 'enunciative productivity' (talk, discussion, style) and 'textual productivity' (fan fiction, fan art), as well as participation (incidentally as in attending screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or more

directly as in writing letters to the producers of *Star Trek*), and the accumulation of fan-specific cultural capital (detailed information, expert knowledge, collecting). Fandom 'selects from the repertoire of mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment certain performers, narratives or genres and takes them into the culture of a self-selected fraction of the people', where they are then 'reworked into an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more 'normal' popular audiences.' That is, all audiences engage in semiotic production, but fans convert this into 'textual productivity'. This textual productivity forms a 'shadow cultural economy' outside the cultural industries yet 'shares features with them which more normal popular culture lacks'. In fans, Fiske sees examples of Bourdieu's 'autodidacts' compensating for the gap between their social aspirations and their real conditions of existence through the amassing of expert knowledge and the performance of (sub)cultural capital (Fiske, 1992: 34). They discriminate fiercely, using modes of judgement aligned to both 'the socially relevant discrimination of popular culture' and the 'aesthetic discrimination of the dominant' (Fiske, 1992: 35).

Because Jenkins' (1992) *Textual Poachers* is to some extent the defining text in cultural studies approaches to fandom, it is worth going through in some detail in order to establish the ways in which studies of fandom pre-shadow a more widespread interest in the potential of 'participatory culture', but at the same time separate fans from 'ordinary' audiences. For Jenkins, fans are 'textual poachers' because, in terms of economics, they are powerless and dependent:

Like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural

marginality and social weakness. Like other popular readers, fans lack direct access to the means of commercial cultural production and have only the most limited resources with which to influence entertainment industry's decisions. Fans must beg with the networks to keep their favorite shows on the air, must lobby producers to provide desired plot developments or to protect the integrity of favorite characters. Within the cultural economy, fans are peasants, not proprietors, a recognition which most contextualize our celebration of strategies of popular resistance. (Jenkins, 1992: 27)

On a symbolic level all audiences are 'selective users of a vast media culture whose treasures, though corrupt, hold wealth that can be mined and refined for alternative uses', but fans specifically 'constitute a particularly active and vocal community of consumers whose activities direct attention onto this process of cultural appropriation' (Jenkins, 1992: 27). Fans are distinguished from the indifferently casual 'bystanders' of recent television audience theory, in their own discourse drawing distinctions between 'regularly viewing a program and becoming fans of a series' (Jenkins, 1992: 56): the television fan 'makes a commitment to the series, draws it close' and 'interweaves' it with her everyday life (Jenkins, 1992: 57).

Jenkins describes a number of 'levels of activity' that structure fandom. First, fandom involves 'a particular mode of reception' characterised by attentive, close reading, with 'a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance'. Second, fandom involves 'a particular set of critical and interpretive practices' which are established as normative by the fan community and must be learned by the novice

fan. These practices are both closely related to the everyday lives of the fans and draw them ‘far beyond the information explicitly presented’ and ‘toward the construction of a meta-text.’ Third, fandom ‘constitutes a base for consumer activism’—fans ‘speak back’ to the producers and television networks, and assert their rights to express their opinions about particular programs. Fourth, fandom possesses ‘particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions and practices’, as in for example fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, and fan music (or ‘filking’). Fans ‘appropriate the raw materials from the commercial culture but use them as the basis for the creation of a contemporary folk culture.’ In fact, for Jenkins and others, this production of derivative texts is probably the most important defining characteristic of the fan as distinct from the audience. Finally, these distinctive practices of textual production and consumption take place within fan subculture, or what Jenkins refers to as an ‘alternative social community’ defined by its ‘refusal of mundane values and practices’. Indeed, Jenkins goes so far as to frame fandom as ‘a critique of conventional forms of popular culture’.

While the semiotic creativity and textual productivity of fans were arguably ‘ordinary’ because of their embeddedness in the everyday lives of the fans themselves, they were nevertheless *positioned as extraordinary* by the interpretive lens of cultural and media studies; and in any case, fans were a minority of audiences. Although the popular hyperbole surrounding the ‘democratisation’ of media by its nature tends to highlight both the ordinary ubiquity and the extraordinary, ‘revolutionary’ potential of everyday content creation, textual productivity is not so extraordinary these days. In the new media, the ‘active audience’ is now both a fact and a commercial imperative, even if this new reality is

unevenly recognised and embraced by the media industries themselves (Jenkins, 2006a: 18-19). It no longer requires complex arguments about semiotic openness to be able to consider the ‘texts’ of new media to be emergent and always in the process of being ‘made’. While continuing to recognise the vanguard status of fan communities (Jenkins, 2006b: 138), we now must understand cultural production to be part of the everyday practice of participation in mainstream new media in a much more widespread sense.

Beyond media ‘consumption’, cultural studies has also paid substantial attention to the ‘bottom-up’ creativity that is discernible in the most mundane practices of everyday life—shopping, cooking, or walking around the city (De Certeau et al., 1998; De Certeau, 1984; Gardiner, 2000). The reinvestment in ‘everyday’ creativity (or, the creativity of everyday life) as a slanted critique of modernity is expressed most clearly in the following passage from De Certeau’s (1997) work *Culture in the Plural*, which predates *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

Every culture proliferates along its margins. Irruptions take place that are called ‘creations’ in relation to stagnancies. Bubbling out of swamps and bogs, a thousand flashes at once scintillate and are extinguished all over the surface of a society. In the official imaginary, they are noted only as exceptions or marginal events. An ideology of property isolates the ‘author,’ the ‘creator,’ and the ‘work’. In reality, creation is a disseminated proliferation. It swarms and throbs. A polymorphous carnival infiltrates everywhere, a celebration both in the streets and in the homes for those who are unblinded by the aristocratic and

museological model of durable production...housing, clothing, housework, cooking, and an infinite number of rural, urban, family, or amical activities...are also the ground on which creation everywhere blossoms. Daily life is scattered with marvels, a froth on the long rhythms of language and history that is as dazzling as that of writers and artists. (De Certeau, 1997: 139-42)

Leaving aside the critiques of the reification and celebration of ‘the everyday’ in cultural studies (see for example Miller & McHoul, 1998) the separation of everyday life from the systems of cultural production that is a precondition of De Certeau’s perspective is not at all straightforward in contemporary contexts, for two reasons. First, the everyday is now ubiquitously part of the production logics of the cultural industries, as in what Graeme Turner (2006) calls the ‘demotic turn’; most obvious in the context of ‘reality TV’, or what Frances Bonner (2003) calls ‘ordinary television’. Second, as discussed above, cultural production (that is, the creation and *public* dissemination of cultural artefacts) is now increasingly part of the logics of everyday life, as in blogging or photo-sharing. In this context, the rather bleak and reactive futility of De Certeau’s (1984) ‘tactics’ of ‘making do’ may be transformed in the cultural studies imagination into something different and more positive: the remediation of everyday creative practice into viable forms of public culture. From the late 1990s onward, Henry Jenkins has begun to turn his attention to these broader possibilities of digital technologies for ‘grass-roots creativity’, arguing that in the case of digital film, as well as providing affordable and powerful resources for production, ‘digital cinema may...at last [provide] a means of distribution and exhibition so that home movies can become public movies’ (2001: 97). In place of

resistance, there is at least the potential, whether realised or not, for cultural participation and self-representation. But the mere opportunity for textual productivity is not in itself sufficient grounds for celebration. The questions that we ask about ‘democratic’ media participation can no longer be limited to ‘who gets to speak?’. We must also ask ‘who is heard’; and even the rather old-fashioned, ‘to what end?’ and, ‘in whose interests?’.

A powerful illustration of the limits of early enthusiasm for the democratic potential of Internet culture is the Cam Girls phenomenon. In Graeme Turner’s (2004; 2006) discussion of DIY celebrity, he argues—partly in response to John Hartley (1999)—that the increased representation of ordinary people as potential or temporary celebrities in the mass media represents, not the ‘democratisation’, but the ‘demoticisation’ of the media. Even when ordinary people become celebrities through their own creative efforts as in the case of the Cam Girls phenomenon, there is no necessary transfer of media power, because they remain within the system of celebrity that is native to and controlled by the mass media, if not within the mass media itself. According to Turner, the ‘demotic turn’ in television articulates equally to the existing structures of celebrity to deliver ‘ordinary celebrity’ which, far from providing alternatives to the existing media industry, is produced and captured by it:

Celebrity still remains a systematically hierarchical and exclusive category, no matter how much it proliferates. No amount of public participation in game shows, reality TV or DIY celebrity websites will alter the fact that, overall, the media industries still remain in control of the symbolic economy, and that they still attempt to operate this

economy in the service of their own interests. Further, and while I might sympathize with the more optimistic accounts, I also want to insist that there is no necessary connection between, on the one hand, a broadening demographic in the pattern of access to media representation and, on the other, a democratic politics. Hence my view that these developments are more correctly seen as a demotic, rather than a democratic, turn.

Diversity is not of itself intrinsically democratic irrespective of how it is generated or by whom. (Turner, 2006: 157-158)

In the mainstream media the distance between ‘ordinary’ citizen and celebrity can only be bridged when the ‘ordinary’ person gains access to the modes of representation and consumption of celebrity in the mass media, making the transition from what Nick Couldry (2003) calls ‘ordinary worlds’ to what he refers to as ‘media worlds’. The distinction between the media world and the ordinary world ‘disguises (and therefore helps naturalize) the inequality of symbolic power which media institutions represent’ (Couldry, 2000: 16). Celebrity is not so different on the Internet. More accessible new media technologies and platforms can open up possibilities for the commercialisation of ‘amateur’ content, and in some cases turn the producers of that content into celebrities. Two well-known examples are *Baghdad Burning*, a published version of the weblog by the same name, written by a female Iraqi author known only by the pseudonym ‘riverbend’, being longlisted for the 2006 Samuel Johnson prize (Ezard, 2006); and Jonathan Couette’s autobiographical film *Tarnation* (which was reputedly produced for around 200 USD and edited entirely in Apple’s ‘consumer-level’ video editing program iMovie) achieving recognition at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival (Silverman, 2004). But

the marker of success for these new forms, paradoxically, is measured not only by their online popularity, but by their subsequent ability to pass through the gatekeeping mechanisms of old media—the book prize, the film festival, the advertising deal. Further, ‘ordinary’ participation is now part of the logics of both the new media and the new economy—one of the more striking examples is *Wired’s* recent article on ‘crowdsourcing’ (Howe, 2006), where the collective enthusiasms and amateur expertise of the masses are framed quite explicitly as free (or at least very cheap) labour. As Tiziana Terranova wrote of a slightly earlier period in new media culture:

Simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, free labor on the Net includes the activity of building Web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists, and building virtual spaces on MUDs and MOOs. Far from being an ‘unreal’, empty space, the Internet is animated by cultural and technical labor through and through, a continuous production of value that is completely immanent to the flows of the network society at large.

(Terranova, 2000: 33)

Under what circumstances, then, does *ordinary* vernacular creativity convert to cultural agency? The question returns us to the matter of the cultural studies imagination—where are the spaces of hope amid the hype?

There are various ‘others’ of ‘ordinary’ vernacular creativity—punk-influenced DIY culture, creative activism, fandom and game cultures—that are in different ways very attractive to cultural studies (either for their spectacularly creative uses of mass

popular culture, or for their apparent demonstration of an evidential base for spectacular ‘resistance’). Without ever leaving ‘traditional’ cultural studies territory, it would be all too easy to pick out ‘amateur’ or everyday uses of technology that are at once mundane and seductively ‘cool’, and proceed to an analysis of the resistive qualities of these practices. For example, the ‘Lomography’ movement of the 1990s (whose members celebrate cheap plastic Russian cameras like the Lomo from which the name comes) has developed its own aesthetic, one which appears to resist conformity and artistic authority and to allow the free play of creativity for ordinary people. The lomography.com website has built a business out of the movement, offering participation in a community of Lomography enthusiasts, with cameras and merchandise for sale. From their website³ come these ‘10 Golden Rules of Lomography’:

1. take your camera everywhere you go
2. use it any time—day and night
3. lomography is not an interference in your life, but a part of it
4. try the shot from the hip
5. approach the objects of your lomographic desire as close as possible
6. don’t think
7. be fast

³ See <http://www.lomography.com>

8. you don't have to know beforehand what you capture on film
9. afterwards either
10. don't worry about the rules

Lomography represents itself as a democratic form of photography, and these 'anti-rules' are clearly intended to offer resistance to the ways in which the rules of 'professional photography' repress 'ordinary' creativity and continually redraw the boundaries between the 'amateur' and the 'professional'. But these are no 'ordinary' snapshots – there are few kittens, baby photos, or family groups here; what we get instead are cool images of retro bathrooms imbued with greenish light, rows of subway seats, skewed statues, and reflections on rainy windows. The Lomography movement combines the signifiers of amateur photography ('the everyday' as preferred subject, the 'snapshot' aesthetic) with the fetishisation of technological obsolescence and a prescription for photographic practice that explicitly marks it as a playful refusal of artistic tradition, therefore neatly conflating amateurism and the avant-garde. The 2004 Sony Cybershot television advertisement featuring the pair of teenagers 'sleep shooting' in a nocturnal urban environment directly references this particular formation of photographic practice, and attempts to leverage something of its (post-authentic) authenticity in building a brand identity for Sony's digital products. While this aesthetic and the idea of amateur creativity it promotes are both ubiquitous in contemporary urban Western cultures, the playful or ironic kinds of refusal of 'dominant' (photographic) culture that Lomography endorses actually rely on very particular cultural competencies as well as creative and technological literacies.

This is also the case in some sectors of the contemporary ‘craft’ movement, which is structured by the reclamation of material culture and the politics of decentralised production. At the ‘serious’ end of contemporary craft is a traditional ethic of resistance to global capitalism:

There is clearly another imperative at work now in our exercise of the old crafts. It has to do with reclamation, with reparation. The world seems not to need us any more to make ‘the things of life.’ Machines make more and cheap. The system needs us to do the maintenance jobs and to run the machines that produce the so-called ‘goods,’ to be machines in the consumer societies which consume and consume and are empty. Our turning to craftwork is a refusal. We may not all see ourselves this way, but we are work from a position of dissent. And that is a political position. (Gillespie, 1987: 178)

At the most extreme end of this movement are communities of practice aligned with anti-capitalism protest movements: see for example the ‘manifesto’ of the Revolutionary Knitting Circle:

We hold that all communities should have the means necessary to meet every essential need of their own people. To that end, the Revolutionary Knitting Circle calls upon people everywhere to take up the struggle through the tools of local production. We shall bring forth not only our voices raised for global justice, but we shall rise together, with the tools to liberate local communities from the shackles of global corporatism. (The Revolutionary Knitting Circle, 2001)

The refusal at work in these DIY communities is not only a refusal of the affluent Western individual's interpellation as the consumer of inauthentic, technologised and mass-produced artefacts; it is also avowedly a recuperation of everyday domestic labour and productive leisure—knitting, sewing—from their undervalued status in contemporary regimes of cultural value. However, these practices are very often recuperated *for hipness* via the differentiation of 'indie craft' from the middlebrow aesthetic of the 'craft store'. The following excerpt from an interview with Julie Jackson of *Subversive Cross Stitch* clearly expresses the politics of this particular version of 'radical craft':

Appropriating the cutesy-pie bunnies and duckies of cross-stitch kits, Jackson added her own homespun witticisms: "Whatever," "Go Fuck Yourself," "Get a Life." [...]

Q: You started subversive cross-stitching as a way of venting frustration at a bad work environment. Did it help?

A: Oh so much! It was a very conservative workplace where precious, dainty and frilly were the norm. So many people there were pretty on the outside but nasty on the inside. So it was an especially therapeutic little hobby.

Q: Does cross-stitch have a tendency to be more saccharine than other needle arts?

A: Not really. You could probably create more intricate details and flourishes with other kinds of embroidery. But any medium can be made sickeningly sweet, as evidenced in any local craft store. (Feaster, 2006)

Taken to extremes, the DIY trend, which peaked in zine culture in the 1990s, but is now also a significant dynamic in contemporary material culture, represents a form of amateurism that repeats, and in some cases explicitly draws on, the ethics and aesthetics of 1970s British punk—an aesthetics of resistance whose politics were consciously encoded in the subculture’s forms of symbolic expression (Triggs, 2006). Within cultural studies, the aesthetics of resistance that continue to emanate from ‘DIY culture’ map onto a familiar disciplinary tendency: the articulation, following the lead of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, of avant-garde aesthetics with progressive politics (for an example of the advocacy of this position, see especially Kellner, 1997). This is the ‘radical subversion’ position, which McGuigan (2005: 438) calls the ‘direct obverse of uncritical populism’. But, as McGuigan implies, the conflation of ‘progressive’ aesthetics with notions of resistance to the alienating and deadening effects of passive consumerism is both elitist and, as anti-popular polemicists like Thomas Frank (1997) argue, now the stuff of consumerism itself. Most importantly, it is highly questionable whether punk-style DIY culture operates to secure greater cultural democracy—indeed, it is more likely that it works to exclude those without the cultural competencies required to correctly read its symbolic codes and participate in its modes of cultural production and performance. Throughout the period of research for this study, I have kept these fields of vernacular creativity in the frame, recognising the ways in which they are frequently positioned as the seductive leading edge of a potential paradigm shift (or even a ‘revolution’). However, because I aim to understand whether new media allows the populace ‘at large’ to participate more meaningfully in public culture through vernacular creativity, I have dealt primarily with some of the more apparently

accessible, mainstream and ordinary forms of vernacular creativity in new media contexts. I have not studied fandom or game studies in any depth, not because they are not important sites of contestation around media power and agency in contemporary new media contexts, but because they so clearly are. That is, because these examples lead to an entirely different set of questions—questions predominantly focused around the relations of cultural production between content-producers and content-users and re-purposers. What I am more interested is in the re-mediation of ordinary, previously unmediated experience, self-representations and stories—the remediation of vernacular creativity.

Where in contemporary new media contexts might there be spaces of hope for cultural participation based around vernacular creativity and even, to introduce a stronger term, cultural citizenship? To provide the background to this question, in the following section of this chapter I trace certain key developments in contemporary theories of citizenship and the public sphere, reconnecting them to the politics of popular culture discussed above, and finally proposing a model of cultural citizenship that might be constituted via the everyday practice of vernacular creativity.

3. Cultural Citizenship and The Networked Public Sphere

There is by now a substantial body of work, some of it informed by feminist perspectives, that argues for post-Habermasian theoretical alternatives to the normative value of critical reason and narrow definitions of the public sphere, on the basis that commercial popular culture can sometimes be literally as constitutive of cultural citizenship, especially for women, queers, and racial or ethnic minorities, as

are the spaces of formal politics (Cunningham & Sinclair, 2001; Felski, 1989; Hartley & Green, 2006; Hartley, 1999; Hermes, 2005; McKee, 2004). Building towards a similar position, I will briefly trace some of the key arguments in these debates in order to connect the idea of a cultural public sphere to contemporary models of cultural citizenship, especially with reference to the structural characteristics of new media.

The classic normative appropriation of the Habermasian model of the public sphere (Habermas, 1992) imagines a universally accessible space where citizens engage in the political process through rational-critical debate. Among other complaints (covered comprehensively in Goode, 2005), critics of this ideal argue that its claims to openness are incompatible with the normative valorisation of a particular mode of discourse – critical reason – that is anything but universal in its inclusiveness (McGuigan, 2005), not because it is only white bourgeois men who are capable of being rational, but because it is only white bourgeois men who can easily negotiate their interests under the ‘reigning protocols’ of rational-critical debate, ‘including the idea that one needs to bracket one’s private self in order to engage in public discussion’ (Warner, 2005: 51-54). As Warner argues:

The ability to bracket one’s embodiment and status is not simply what Habermas calls making public use of one’s reason; it is a strategy of distinction, profoundly linked to education and to dominant forms of masculinity. (Warner, 2005: 51)

However, Warner (2005: 55) notes that, although Habermas is not particularly interested in cultural difference, the idea that he describes the public sphere as

singular or universal is a misrecognition. In Habermas's (1996) *Between Facts and Norms*, although it is still rational-critical deliberation that is the *business* of democracy, the model of the public sphere as a *site* of democracy is further developed in ways that clarify this point so that the idea of a public sphere is more compatible with the idea of a network society (Castells, 1996):

The public sphere cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organization [...] Just as little does it represent a system; although it permits one to draw internal boundaries, outwardly it is characterized by open, permeable, and shifting horizons. The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes) [...].

(Habermas, 1996: 360)

Further, there is no such thing as 'a' public sphere, but multiple spaces for the formation of *publics* via communication. The public sphere 'distinguishes itself through a communicative structure that...refers neither to the functions nor to the contents of everyday communication but to the social space generated in communicative action' (Habermas, 1996: 360). Habermas refers to a 'substantive differentiation of [multiple] public spheres' that are not overdetermined by expert discourses but that are 'accessible to laypersons'. He lists as examples 'popular science and literary publics, religious and artistic publics, feminist and "alternative" publics, publics concerned with health-care issues, social welfare, or environmental policy' (Habermas, 1996: 373-74).

Most significantly for the study of everyday participation in the practice of citizenship, Habermas argues that the public sphere takes multiple forms, some of which are transitory and ephemeral:

The public sphere is differentiated into levels according to the density of communication, organizational complexity, and range—from the episodic publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets; through the occasional or “arranged” publics of particular presentations and events, such as theater performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the abstract public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers scattered across large geographic areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only through the mass media. (Habermas, 1996: 374)

Despite their differentiations, these ‘partial publics’ which are ‘constituted by ordinary language [...] remain porous to one another’ (Habermas, 1996: 374).

Ultimately, Habermas does not abandon the idea of the universal altogether. Rather, he resolves the question with a model of the public sphere that accommodates counter-publics (Warner, 2005) in the interest of its own survival:

The rights to unrestricted inclusion and equality built into liberal public spheres prevent exclusion mechanisms of the Foucauldian type and ground a potential for self-transformation. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the universalist discourses of the bourgeois public sphere could no longer immunize themselves against a critique from within. The labor movement and feminism, for example, were able

to join these discourses in order to shatter the structures that had initially constituted them as ‘the other’ of a bourgeois public sphere. (Habermas, 1996: 374)

Michael Warner’s (2005) *Publics and Counterpublics* represents a key conceptual move that emphasises both the affective and embodied dimensions, and the diverse and multiple structural characteristics, of contemporary mediated publics. While *the* public (singular) is ‘a kind of social totality’ that tends to be abstracted at the level of the nation-state (Warner, 2005: 65), there are also multiple, concrete *publics* (plural), each of which also has some sense of unity and boundedness:

A crowd at a sports event, a concert, or a riot might be a bit blurrier around the edges but still knows itself by knowing where and when it is assembled in common visibility and common action. (Warner, 2005: 66)

What Warner is most interested in clarifying, however, is the idea of *a* public—the kind of public ‘that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation’, and which consists of both concrete and imagined ‘audiences’ (Warner, 2005: 66).

Warner’s idea of the constitution of publics via ‘texts and their circulation’ can be usefully situated in relation to Jim McGuigan’s (2005) work on the *cultural* public sphere. Contrary to the Habermasian singular focus on reason, McGuigan argues that the exclusion of everyday life, affect, and pleasure from our understanding of democratic participation is a serious misrecognition of some of the most powerful modes of civic engagement:

In the late-modern world, the cultural public sphere is not confined to a

republic of letters—the eighteenth century’s literary public sphere—and ‘serious’ art, classical, modern or, for that matter, postmodern. It includes the various channels and circuits of mass-popular culture and entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life. The concept of a cultural public sphere refers to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective – aesthetic and emotional – modes of communication. [...] The cultural public sphere provides vehicles for thought and feeling, for imagination and disputatious argument, which are not necessarily of inherent merit but may be of consequence.

(McGuigan, 2005: 435)

Connected to this reconceptualisation of the ‘public’ is the idea that contemporary citizenship is not only a matter of an individual’s codified rights and obligations in relation to the state. Rather, the concept of citizenship describes the ways in which individuals participate in practices and collectivities that form around matters of shared interest, identity or concern, in local, national, global and hybrid spaces. Davidson (1997) outlines three movements in the development of contemporary citizenship: first, from subjecthood (in relation to the British Empire, in Australia’s case) to national citizenship; second, from monocultural to multicultural citizenship; third, from passive to ‘active’ citizenship. Hemingway (1999) argues that top-down governance results in weak citizenship, while participatory democracy, like participatory media, requires ‘strong’ citizenship:

The conception of the citizen in participatory democracy is thus of an

engaged individual who makes political activity a reasonable priority, who understands the need for preparation in order to engage in informed communication with fellow citizens in order to define the situation in which they find themselves together, and who actively seeks opportunities to refine her/his abilities and knowledge to contribute to creating the community in which he/she wishes to live. The citizenship required by participatory democracy may therefore be labeled 'strong citizenship'. (1999: 154)

There has been a substantial amount of recent work in citizenship and leisure studies about how informal social gatherings can be sites of the practice of citizenship and, largely in rebuttal to Putnam's (2000) assertion that social capital is declining in Western democracies, that participation in such groups can generate 'democratic social capital' (Hemingway, 1999). Examples of such sites of everyday leisure and community involvement as generators of social capital are community gardens (Glover, 2005), heritage leisure sites, and sporting events (Misener & Mason, 2006). This work contributes a less individualistic and more communitarian conceptualisation of leisure that can 'provide spaces for the social self and civic engagement to emerge' (Arai & Pedlar, 2003: 185).

These spaces can be constituted by 'consumerist' leisure practices as much as they are created through 'public leisure provision'; indeed, new forms of consumerism may have served to re-define 'leisure citizenship' (Coalter, 2000: 163). That is, it does not necessarily follow that 'consumerist' leisure is individualist, where participation in publicly provided activities is communitarian, or that consumption is

‘passive’, while participation in publicly provided activities is both a more ‘active’ and ‘genuine’ form of citizenship (Coalter, 2000). The kinds of activity that Putnam found wanting, viewed differently, can lead to the conclusions that ‘apparently privatistic or transitory or individualistic or apparently low-cost actions may have far-reaching civic benefits’ (Schudson, 2006: 604). These arguments are clearly not very far removed from the idea of cultural citizenship—in both, everyday life is reconceptualised as a potential site of citizenship; in both, there is a convergence between the apparently separate domains of consumption and citizenship.

Across the disciplines, the term ‘cultural citizenship’ is used in at least two different but interlocking ways; differences that largely proceed from the profound and well-documented multivalence of the qualifying adjective—the ‘cultural’. To summarize, it is a core insight of cultural studies that citizenship has irreducibly cultural elements; and that more importantly, the media and everyday life—the traditional domains of cultural studies—are both the sources and the sites of citizenship *as a practice* (Hermes & Dahlgren, 2006).

First, ‘cultural citizenship’ is used in relation to identity politics; to describe how cultural identity and vernacular experience are imbricated with political processes, rights and obligations (as in, for example Rosaldo, 1994), or, as Toby Miller puts it, ‘the maintenance, development, and exchange of cultural lineage—a celebration of difference, which is also a critique of the status quo’ (Miller, 2007: 179). For Rosaldo, cultural citizenship is opposed to the homogeneity of nationalistic discourse and refers to ‘the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense’. Additionally, Rosaldo introduces the idea of ‘vernacular definitions’ of citizenship, arguing that the sense of belonging and wellbeing that should be the outcome of cultural citizenship are not determined from ‘above’ but are to be understood relative to the economic situations and cultural identities of particular social groups, e.g. women or ethnic minorities.

The second possible interpretation of the concept of cultural citizenship relies on a more traditional British cultural studies-influenced understanding of culture as both ordinary and mediated. In this sense, the term cultural citizenship is used to describe how the ‘cultural public sphere’ (e.g. television) educate, model and act as spaces for

the practice of democracy and citizenship in everyday life—that is, that the cultural public sphere is the space where the possible forms of citizenship are constituted (Miller, 2007), but across this contested theoretical terrain, the complex politics of the relationships between citizenship, identity and particular media forms are then a matter of shared concern for cultural studies (Miller, 2007).

Proceeding to specific explorations of cultural citizenship in relation to the politics of popular culture within contemporary cultural studies, Joke Hermes (2005) provides one of the most useful and substantial recent contributions to the debate. Her work explicitly attempts to move 1980s British Cultural Studies arguments about cultural citizenship and the ‘uses of popular culture’ forward, from what she views as an earlier idealisation of ‘pleasure and resistance’ to a more critical and balanced view:

...it makes sense, first of all, to give credit to Fiske and Hartley’s notion that popular culture may be understood as democracy at work. But it also means that we should review whether popular culture is truly democratic in its effects: What kind of citizenship is (cultural) citizenship? And how does it exclude as well as include? (2005: 2)

Rather than being concerned with rights and representations, or being overdetermined by identity politics, Hermes is interested in how ‘cultural citizenship as a term can also be used in relation to less formal everyday practices of identity construction, representation, and ideology, and implicit moral obligations and rights’ (2005: 4).

After a detailed critique of both Toby Miller (1993) and more recent work by John Hartley (1999), Hermes offers the following definition:

Cultural citizenship can be defined as the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture.

(2005: 10)

But perhaps the most promising connection between Hermes' notion of cultural citizenship through the active consumption of popular culture and the more directly 'productive' practice of everyday creativity in new media contexts lies in her (2005) statement that 'popular cultural texts and practices are important because they provide much of the wool from which the social tapestry is knit'. It is important to point out that 'popular culture' does not necessarily mean commercial, mass-produced culture; in a recent article on scrapbooking that foreshadows the articulation of vernacular creativity with cultural citizenship that I want to establish here, Karina Hof (2006: 364) writes that 'scrapbooking exemplifies how an everyday cultural practice can magnetize and mobilize people through a community of practice.' The participation in both scrapbooking as an individual creative practice and in communities of practice that form *around* scrapbooking, Hof argues, 'offers a very visible form and forum through which scrappers show what and whom they care about, how they live and where they fit into society at large' (self-*representation* as a cultural citizen). Not only that, but such cultural participation also entails the exercising of 'duties and privileges' (the *practice* of cultural

citizenship). This model of cultural citizenship could just as easily apply to the creation, showcasing and discussion of vernacular content in digital culture—the core business of extremely popular ‘user-led’ creative communities like DeviantArt, Flickr and YouTube.

However, these models of both the cultural public sphere and cultural citizenship require even more reconfiguration if they are to be useful in any attempt to understand the transformation in ‘popular culture’ represented by the increase in consumer-created content in new media contexts. To be useful in an investigation of cultural citizenship in digital culture, the concept must also explicitly take into account the interweaving of everyday life, creative content production and the *publicness* of social life that are characteristic of digital culture.

In terms of political communication, the recognition of the Internet’s potential uses can be divided into two main branches: first, e-government (or e-governance), which, to put it crudely, is narrowly concerned with understanding how governments can best use the Internet to carry out the business of governing; and second, e-democracy, which is much closer to the concerns of the present study in that it encompasses the ways in which the participatory potential and citizens’ uses of new media technologies might transform democracy and citizenship as everyday practices. Stephen Coleman (2005) has argued that the digital mediation of political representation, if shaped according a proper recognition of the structural dimensions of new media communication might ‘stimulate and facilitate...mutually beneficial communication collaboration’ in three ways: first, ‘by enabling a more expansive and interactive’ accountability; second, by ‘accommodating a pluralistic network of

representations' in contrast to the linearity of traditional political representation; and third, by 'creating new spaces of public self-representation and experiential reflexivity' (Coleman, 2005: 190). In thinking about the potential crossovers between participatory, or in Hartley's (2004b) terms 'plebiscitary' media such as *Big Brother* (Coleman, 2003), Coleman and Gøtze (2001: 23) describe this in rather strong terms, as a model of 'citizens as shareholders in power rather than consumers of policy'. Analogous to the shift from one-to-many to many-to-many models of communication in popular media, the question for a more effective use of ICTs in the service of deliberative democracy is how to 'transcend the one-way model of service delivery and exploit for democratic purposes the feedback paths that are inherent to digital media' (Coleman & Gøtze, 2001: 5).

Connecting these attributes of new media and their potential for new forms of democracy to the idea of *cultural* citizenship, then, the significance of new media lies in the shift from a 'common' cultural public sphere through which individuals in local communities understand the world (as in, for example, the ideal models of public service broadcasting), to everyday active participation in a networked, highly heterogeneous and open cultural public sphere. In discussing the implications for citizenship of the 'turn' towards participatory culture, William Uricchio (2004: 140) argues that participation in certain P2P (peer-to-peer) communities 'constitutes a form of cultural citizenship, and that the terms of this citizenship have the potential to run head to head with established political citizenship'. Uricchio proposes a model of cultural citizenship that directly incorporates the reconfigured relations between (formerly centralised) cultural production and consumption in participatory culture:

Community, freed from any necessary relationship to the nation-state, and participation, in the sense of active, then, are two prerequisites for the enactment of cultural citizenship... And it is in this context that I want to assert that certain forms of ... participatory culture ... in fact constitute sites of cultural citizenship. I refer here particularly to collaborative communities, sites of collective activity that exist thanks only to the creative contributions, sharing, and active participation of their members. (Uricchio, 2004: 148)

Uricchio is careful to point out that while some of these manifestations of participatory culture occur ‘virtually’, online, others occur face-to-face.

These questions around models of citizenship can also be read through the debates around social capital and ‘virtual communities’ in new media studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s—debates that were not normative but centred around whether or not ‘virtual’ communities were ‘really’ communities at all (and later, whether they were ‘good’ communities). Wellman’s (2001) idea of ‘networked individualism’ has been particularly influential in these debates. The idea of community *as* a social network implies that it is the individual, rather than the collective, that is the focal point. The dominant mode of participation in a social network relies on peer-to-peer rather than broadcast models of communication, and interaction is informal, transitory and less structured (Foth, 2006). Wellman (2001) introduces the term ‘networked individualism’ to argue that, far from contributing to the alienation of citizens from their communities, social networks have a hybrid quality that combines

the communitarian nature of community with the ‘strength of weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1973).

If citizenship *per se* can be imagined as a continuum—with peripheral, relatively passive participation, represented by the action of voting at one end; and ‘full’ participation, represented by engagement, deliberation, self-representation and advocacy at the other, then for cultural citizenship in ‘contemporary commercial democracies’ (Hartley, 2003), the imaginary ‘passive’ endpoint is represented by the figure of the consumer who merely chooses from among the range of cultural products on offer. As several decades of cultural studies research demonstrates, even ‘mere’ consumption is not passive this way, but instead involves discrimination, deliberation, the integration into everyday life and the discursive re-purposing of culture. The other imagined end-point of the continuum—full participation—is represented by the active contribution of content that circulates in meaningful ways, in addition to some form of ongoing engagement in the peer-to-peer communities of practice that form around interests or matters of shared concern. These forms of cultural participation have not yet been consistently studied as part of the practice of cultural citizenship for the ordinary ‘consumer’, but it is precisely this model of cultural citizenship that the ‘democratisation of technologies’ for cultural production appears to invite. Just as grassroots media, blogging, and collaborative online news production (Bruns, 2005b) appear to offer the opportunity for participation in the public sphere and the formation of counter-publics in the arena of ‘information’ and capital-P politics, the democratisation of creative production appears to offer the opportunity for participation in the cultural public sphere, and accordingly, the emergence of more variegated forms of popular culture.

However, it is now necessary to do more than recognise and celebrate this potential. Within and across societies, the notion of a ‘digital divide’, which describes the unevenness of hard access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) has shifted to concerns around social inclusion and the unevenness of access to literacy and ‘voice’ in the global mediascape (Warschauer, 2003). If, as I have argued, vernacular creativity is bound up with cultural citizenship, then these familiar questions in regard to democracy around inclusion and exclusion, voice and participation become central. If active cultural participation—full cultural citizenship—in contemporary mediated contexts requires the practice of content creation and participation in communities of practice, then technological literacy is vitally important. Indeed, Sonia Livingstone (2004: 11) has recently argued that attention to content creation as a key area of literacy is ‘crucial to the democratic agenda’, positioning new media users ‘not merely as consumers but also as citizens’.

Gandy (2002: 458) argues that the ‘real digital divide’ is between citizens and consumers—and that the frequently claimed convergence between the two actually occurs mainly at higher income and literacy levels. The result, he argues, is a social shaping of new media towards the interests of already powerful social groups, including profound individualisation. Michael Tracey (1998: 263) frames this social shaping as a barrier to what has been traditionally understood as a democratic public sphere—creating a mediated social world that is ‘profoundly individualistic and definitely not collective, public, shared or coherent.’ However, Nick Stevenson (Stevenson, 2003a, 2003b) argues that it is possible to imagine a progressive, cosmopolitanism cultural citizenship within the social reality of increased individualisation. Stevenson defines cultural citizenship as ‘the contested desire to

foster a communicative society’—a desire that ‘can only be achieved by situating the normative questions of justice and difference within a rapidly changing global and information-based society’ (2003b: 151). Stevenson calls for a revived model of the public sphere, based on the promotion of sustained opportunities for participation and dialogue. A central question is how to balance the pleasures of consumer culture with the ethos of civic responsibility (for example, in regard to environmental issues); and therefore, how each of us can negotiate our identities as individual cosmopolitan citizens of a cultural society without merely echoing the rhetoric of neoliberalism. For Stevenson, there is a distinction to be made between ‘cosmopolitan individualisation’, which he views as an ideal, and ‘market individualisation’, which is the lived reality of citizens in a ‘cultural society’. The achievement of cosmopolitan individualisation would mean learning how to live both responsibly and in a way that is true to ourselves—‘in a cultural society this might mean living more creatively or seeking to develop our capacities in ways that become detached from the remorseless logic of more, bigger and better’ (2003b: 152). Market individualisation, on the other hand, invites us to aspire to the achievement of the ‘good life’ through consumption, flexibility and agency—which is understood as reducible to the ability to choose among a range of available commodities. The way forward, Stevenson argues, is a kind of reconciliation of the ideal with the actual: active identification and educated, contested communication rather than tolerance; engagement with the complexity and specificity of difference rather than benign indifference to the Other; and finding ways to balance sustainability and pleasure (2003b: 152).

In terms of cultural citizenship, then, there are two issues for the practice of vernacular creativity in digital culture. The first of these is the issue of cultural inclusion—who gets to participate, and on whose terms, and in whose interests? The second is the form that cultural citizenship, as constituted by vernacular creativity, takes in specific new media contexts—is it individualistic self-representation of ones’ interests and enthusiasms; the formation of collectivities; or complex articulations of these two? In concrete and not abstract terms, what forms of cultural participation are possible or invited, and what are the consequences for models of cultural citizenship?

4. Conclusions

This chapter has developed and historicised the concept of vernacular creativity and established its relevance to the ‘participatory turn’ in new media, and the concept has been positioned in relation to the symbolic boundaries of other fields of cultural production. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term ‘vernacular creativity’ stands in for a wide range of everyday creative practices (from scrapbooking to family photography to the storytelling that forms part of casual chat). The term ‘vernacular’—as with language, where it means colloquial—signifies the ways in which everyday creativity is practiced outside the cultural value systems of either high culture (art) or commercial creative practice (television). Further, and again as with language, ‘vernacular’ signifies the local specificity of such creative practices, and the need to pay attention to the material, cultural, and geographic contexts in which they occur.

Drawing on cultural studies scholarship, I have argued that it is especially important for cultural studies approaches to take ‘ordinary’ cultural production, and not only the innovative practices of early adopters like fans and gamers, or the ‘extraordinary’ practices of punk-influenced DIY communities into account. I have proposed that the articulation of vernacular creativity with digital culture appears to hold significant promise for the practice of cultural citizenship. Vernacular creativity in new media contexts represents a ‘space of hope’ for the model of cultural citizenship I established above because its means of production promise to be accessible, offering the creative citizen a place to *speak*, and because it appears to be a potential means of *connecting* cultural citizens. But how and where is this potential currently being realised in practice, and within what constraints? How do platforms and technologies designed for vernacular creativity shape the practice of vernacular creativity and provide models of cultural participation? To what extent do they shape the social worlds of vernacular creativity – to what extent do they individualize or collectivise subjectivities? To what extent do they promote cultural inclusion or exclusion?

To begin investigating these questions, it is necessary to construct an appropriate approach to the questions of structure and agency that deals with the complex relations between the technological and the social. This is especially important because, in contemporary new media contexts, technology features much more explicitly and prominently as an element in the shaping of cultural participation than it did in the broadcast era. Although new media technologies—the VCR, for example—figured significantly in changed relations between the ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ of particular broadcast media forms, the convergence between

consumer-created media content, computers, digital devices and the internet in new media contexts means that the individual who participates in everyday cultural production in such contexts now directly encounters multiple layers of technological complexity as a matter of course.

The following chapter looks in detail at vernacular creativity in relation to technological change. It explores the socio-technical construction of and constraints on specific forms of vernacular creativity at specific historical moments of technological innovation and stabilisation. Articulating the social constructionist and critical theory of technology traditions with the conceptual framework established here, it will discuss the ways in which technologies construct an 'ideal user' and the ways in which the cultural contexts in which those technologies are embedded 'teach' the user how they should be used. The chapter concludes by assessing the dominant contemporary construction of vernacular creativity in contemporary new media contexts.

Chapter 3

Vernacular Creativity and Technological Change

1. Introduction

The everyday practices of vernacular creativity have always been articulated to cultural and technological shifts, and are currently being remediated in new media contexts in specific ways. Of particular interest in this thesis are the ways that various forms of vernacular creativity—especially popular photography and everyday storytelling—are contributing to the landscape of public culture via new media technologies. The processes of remediation are clearly not one-way, but dialectical.

One particularly obvious recent example of the relationship between vernacular creativity and technological change is the ‘mass’ adoption of the personal weblog. Clearly, this new feature of the mediascape is connected to quite recent innovations in web design and database systems as well as the cultural work that has been done by blogging enthusiasts and the mass media in popularising blogging as an ‘ordinary’ practice. Prior to the mainstream adoption of blogging, the personal web page was arguably the most virulent form of vernacular creativity (and a significant site of design development) on the World Wide Web from the mid-1990s until the early 2000s (Howard, 2005). The overwhelming dominance of Google’s search engine not only over other search engines but also over web indexes, and particularly its prioritisation of dynamic over static content, has contributed significantly to the visibility of weblogs, but at the same time it has rendered the personal web page

almost invisible to most web users.⁴ To add another historical dimension, it was the traditional everyday practice of keeping a personal journal or diary that made the mainstream adoption of the personal weblog possible, just as much as it was the innovations that resulted in radically accessible and powerful content management systems. At the same time, because of the public and networked nature of the personal weblog as a cultural form, everyday journaling has been radically transformed by the migration en masse to blogging as the dominant mode of reflection on one's own life.

How are we to untangle culture and technology in contexts like this? Frequently, popular representations of such shifts construct technological innovations as the determining *cause* of cultural change. As the complexity of the example of blogging above shows, such technological determinism would result in the oversimplification of the issues at stake. However, it would be equally erroneous to take an approach to understanding this process that effaces technology in an over-reaction against technological determinism. This is because, in the first place, technology is not a 'thing' that can be separated out from 'culture' or the social. Rather, technologies are constructed in and shaped by social and cultural contexts, and in various ways encode and shape cultural practices and social relations. At the same time, in order to be recognised by non-technologists *as* particular technologies with comprehensible uses, they inevitably undergo processes of discursive and material stabilisation and

⁴ Although they rarely come up in standard keyword searches, it is still possible to find a million or so of these pages by entering into Google a search string specific to the genre: 'Welcome to my homepage.'

normalisation. However, true closure is never achieved; technologies are open to continuous negotiation and change over time.

This chapter looks closely at the relationship between vernacular creativity and technological change, drawing on the theoretical base provided by critical theories of technology, and incorporating a social constructionist approach. I emphasise the need to remember that vernacular creativity both predates any particular innovation in technologies by centuries and that at the same time its forms and social functions are transformed by cultural and technological shifts. I will argue that each ‘turn’ in this history is structured by value-laden tensions between hackability and usability, design and use, and that the discourses surrounding the relationship between vernacular creativity and technological change reproduce and highlight those tensions as much as they reconfigure them. I discuss the way that ‘creative technologies’ (photography, personal computers and software) have been represented and shaped, and the way these representations and the design of the technologies themselves teach and invite particular kinds of everyday creative practice. The chapter concludes with a detailed discussion of Apple’s iLife suite of software in the context of the historical development of personal computing, the Apple brand and the contemporary ideal of the ‘creative consumer’.

2. Approaches to Culture and Technology

The Social Constructionist Approach

As a starting point, I employ the term ‘technology’ in a broad sense, as does Paul Theberge (1997: 257) for whom technology is not only used ‘to refer to machines’ (or even software) but, ‘more importantly, as in the case of the term ‘technique,’ to indicate the training and discipline of labor and the organization of means’. But beyond the matter of defining the categorical *scope* of ‘technology’, it is necessary to establish a position on the interface between technology and culture that avoids both *technological* determinism—where the inherent properties of technologies determine ahead of time the uses to which they can be put; and *cultural* determinism—where the properties of technologies are defined only by their uses. Instead, I take the position that technologies must be understood as *assemblages*—articulations of economics, material ‘things’, social practices, and wider cultural formations. Accordingly, what is typically understood as technological change always involves changes in these articulations. Slack & Wise (2005) explain the usefulness of this approach for investigating the relations between the apparently separate domains of ‘technology’ and ‘culture’:

Technology as articulation and assemblage offers a whole new way of posing the ‘problem’ of culture and technology. No longer is it possible to think in terms of either technological determinism or cultural determinism, or for that matter, some hybrid of the two positions. By understanding assemblage, flow, relations, connections, and articulations as what matter, the ‘things’ themselves, the physical arrangements of

matter, drift into helpful perspective. They are not unimportant; they are just no longer all-important. They do not act alone or independently.

Assemblages—those imaginary yet concrete constellations—matter. To understand their structure, their power, and their reach, is the *task* of the cultural theorist. To contribute to changing them in constructive directions is the *goal* of the cultural theorist. (Slack & Wise, 2005: 133, original emphasis)

Technology is therefore to be understood as neither the cause nor the effect of cultural change—it is both ‘culture and cultural artefact’ (Bijker, 1995). While the ‘things’ are apparently stable at any particular point in time, social constructionists argue that there are alternatives, and choices made among them, throughout the cycle of innovation, marketing and use. The social constructionist position is summarised effectively by Feenberg (1999: 79) as follows: ‘that the choice between alternatives ultimately depends neither on technical nor economic efficiency, but on the “fit” between devices and the interests and beliefs of the various social groups that influence the design process’. At the beginning of the innovation process, technologies are highly ambiguous as to their meanings, boundaries and purpose: there is always a degree of ‘interpretative flexibility’ in technologies, even as social actors with particular ideological and economic interests compete to stabilise their meanings and range of uses (MacKenzie & Wacjman, 1985; Pinch & Bijker, 1987; Woolgar, 1996).

Silverstone and Haddon (1996) have outlined a theoretical model of how this process occurs and is managed in the ‘domestication’ of consumer-end information and communication technologies (ICTs). Arguing that the innovation process is not confined to the ‘production’ end of the value chain, they argue that consumption and use are ‘equally essential components of the innovation process’:

Production and consumption are not related to each other in a singular or linear fashion, but are the product of a complex pattern of activities in which producers and consumer-users, as well as those who intervene in and facilitate the process of consumption, take part. (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996: 44)

The authors build on this principle to interrogate the complex relationship between design and domestication, as captured in their statement that ‘domestication is anticipated in design and design is completed in domestication’ (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996: 46). Design, they argue, has three dimensions: *creating the artefact*, *constructing the user*, and *catching the consumer*. By ‘constructing the user’, they mean that:

Images of eventual users are incorporated into the fabric of the object, but at the same time users are designed themselves—as ideal or as necessary to complete both the function and vision embodied in the artefact. (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996: 45)

Their concept of ‘catching the consumer’ encompasses the duality of the relationship between technology and the market: on the one hand, technology is central to

consumer capitalism; on the other, the market is central in ‘defining the status and meaning of technology’ (45). Indeed, ‘it is the market, in the form of commodification, which intrudes as a crucial component in the definition of technology precisely at the point where design and use confront each other’ (59).

Andrew Feenberg (1999: 59-66) is more reluctant to de-emphasise the producers’ power in defining technology. He describes the ‘ambivalence’ of technology in relation to human agency—that is, the unstable balance between technology’s potential to serve human interests, and the ways the material limits of any particular technology constrain the exploration of those same interests. Technologies are apprehended as such by the general population only after a period of stabilisation—or ‘congealing’, in Woolgar’s (1996) terms—occurs at the production end. Woolgar explains this process in the following way:

Technology can be regarded as congealed social relations—a frozen assemblage of the practices, assumptions, beliefs, language, and other factors involved in its design and manufacture. . . . [this] suggests that the social relations which are built into the technology have consequences for subsequent usage . . . The social relations confronting the user of technology are therefore relatively durable because they are not easily disrupted and repackaged. (Woolgar, 1996: 89-90)

This is also what is meant by ‘black boxing’: at least some of the many ways in which a particular technology could have ‘been otherwise’ are largely unimaginable to and unachievable by the end user at the point of take-up. At the very least, users

are not invited by the market to reflect on the full range of possible alternatives (Feenberg, 1999: 201; Kirkpatrick, 2004: 3). Feenberg (1999) calls the achievement of this apparent stability ‘technological hegemony’, a process that is never complete but is always open to contestation. Feenberg proposes two fundamental principles of this ambivalence. The first principle is that, despite the utopian claims about democracy that accompany many new technologies, social hierarchy ‘can generally be preserved and reproduced as new technology is introduced’ (Feenberg, 1999: 76). This principle explains the ‘extraordinary continuity of power in advanced capitalist societies over the last several generations’ despite enormous technical changes’ (Feenberg, 1999: 76)—and this is why, Feenberg argues, there can be no purely technological ‘fix’ for social inequality. The second principle Feenberg calls ‘democratic rationalization’, which holds that new technology can also be used to ‘undermine the existing social hierarchy or to force it to meet needs it has ignored’ (Feenberg, 1999: 77)—this principle explains the uses of technologies by new social movements in contemporary societies; exemplified by the rise of online activism and the phenomenon of ‘flash mobs’ (Rheingold, 2002).

Previous Work in Cultural Studies

Cultural studies provides the analytical tools to investigate the ways in which the mediated *representations* of technologies—especially in advertising—not only contribute to the social construction of the *dominant* meanings of any particular technology and its integration into everyday life through consumption and use, but also reproduce technological *ambivalence*, openness and change. A foundational work in cultural studies was Paul du Gay et al’s (1997) *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. The authors demonstrate through a very detailed case

study of the Sony Walkman's conditions of production, representation and consumption the fact that 'meaning' is inherent neither in a cultural object—a 'thing'—nor in its representation alone, but rather is derived from a complex ecology of design, materiality, discourse and use (although, it could be argued, the study might have benefited from more empirical accounts of the incorporation of the Walkman into lived experience). Accordingly, the Walkman is examined not only through its technical production *or* its representation in advertising and media discourse, but as an articulation of multiple sites of cultural production.

I draw additional inspiration for this chapter from two major studies of the cultures constituted by consumer technologies that demonstrate how an integrated understanding of the dynamic relations between the conditions of production, consumption, and representation produce rich accounts of their meanings, uses and implications for cultural politics. The first is Paul Theberge's (1997) study of music technology, *Any Sound You Can Imagine*, where he dealt with the shifts towards the domestication of digital music production using a multi-perspectival approach. Theberge organises his work according to a segmentation of the music technology system into three parts: production and industry; media representations, advertising, and user communities; and everyday consumption and use. Theberge observes a dialogic relationship between musicians and the music technology industries—structured by both mutual dependence and contestation:

Today, in the fast-paced electronics and computer industries, technological obsolescence is both the rule and the rationale for increased consumption. Certainly, musicians are not completely ignorant

of this problem. There appears to be a growing awareness among many musicians that their artistic practice has become deeply implicated with a particular version of the notion of technological ‘progress’ and that along with this ideology comes a number of disturbing musical, economic, and political dilemmas. (Theberge, 1997: 5)

Theberge notes that the dominant construction of the consumer of music technologies (as in computer hacker culture) is of the lone male enthusiast or innovator. Theberge views this as unsurprising, given that discourses of technological and scientific progress have long been connected with the avant-garde in music as in other cultural domains. In avant-garde discourses however, there is a strong distinction between technology as a *means* to producing music (that is, that ‘music’ happens outside but is remediated through technology) and technology as a ‘mode’ of musical production in itself (Theberge, 1997: 157-8). ‘The concept of an “electronic music” or a “computer music”’, as espoused, for example under Boulez at IRCAM (Born, 1995), is ‘based on a musical and historical error that seeks, in typically modernist fashion, to divide these musics from all previous or contemporaneous musical forms, thus making claim to an unprecedented uniqueness and originality’ (Theberge, 1997: 159). Theberge argues that, rather than creating ‘breaks’ or ‘revolutions’ in the culture of musicianship, innovations in musical technologies (which include ‘traditional’ instruments and even the handing down of playing techniques from generation to generation) tend to occur accretively, and become gradually incorporated into the ‘accumulated sensibilities’ of particular instruments, and then to become invisible *as* ‘technology’ to musicians and audiences alike (Theberge, 1997: 159). For example, few people would talk about

the violin bow, or for that matter, bowing direction marks on a score as ‘technology’, but of course that is exactly what they are.

The second study that significantly informs this chapter is Patricia Zimmerman’s (1995) social history of amateur film, which is particularly revealing of the complex relationships between technology, commodification, and cultural change in the domestication of amateur filmmaking. Amateur film, Zimmermann writes, ‘is not simply an inert designation of inferior film practice and ideology but rather is a historical process of social control over representation’ (Zimmerman, 1995: xv). Zimmermann focuses primarily on the changing discursive *construction* of amateur film-making in the twentieth century, and the ways in which discursive practices actually contributed to the reconfiguration and reconstitution of amateur film over time. The material on which her arguments are based is drawn from nearly a century of articles on amateur film-making in the periodical press, including specialist journals on photography, science, technology and the arts, popular magazines and advertising material, as well as drawing on the corporate archives of Bell and Howell, a leading manufacturer of motion picture cameras for amateur use.

Through the analysis of this historical material, Zimmerman is able to draw out some of the concrete technological and economic practices both from ‘above’ and ‘below’ that contributed to the social shaping of amateur film.⁵ From this material, she identifies three distinct periods in the cultural history of amateur film. In the first,

⁵ For example, Zimmerman notes that in 1920 Eastman Kodak and Bell Howell standardized the amateur film format at 16 mm ‘to discourage amateurs from splitting the standard 35 mm into two strips of 17.5 mm stock’.

from the 1890s to the early 1920s, a process of discursive contestation and experimentation resulted in the relative stability of aesthetic norms in amateur film. The second, from the mid-1920s to the Second World War, was shaped by a focus on the development of technology and technique. The third focuses on the 1950s and the redefinition of the home movie within the discourse of post-war domesticity. Zimmerman concludes with some discussion of the implications of home video in the 1980s, including the example of George Holliday's videotape of the Los Angeles police beating Rodney King, suggesting the emergence of a new phase of amateur film 'as a more accessible and meaningful form of personal expression and social and political intervention'.

3. The Socio-Technical Construction of New Media Literacy

Questioning New Media Literacy

I acknowledge that literacy is among the most contested, multivalent and possibly over-used concepts in our repertoire. However, it is also central to the issue of cultural participation in new media contexts, and therefore it is necessary to establish a position on 'new media literacy' that will be productive in understanding these issues. Livingstone (2004) proposes that most discussions of new media literacy have been characterised by historically unresolved tensions between 'critical' or 'enlightenment' views of literacy – polarised philosophical positions that see literacy as a normative and exclusionary construction on the one hand (the 'critical' view); or as an aid to progress and equality that we should aim to extend to all people on the other (the 'enlightenment' view). The work of Brian Street (1995; Street, 1984) and

others (see especially Gee, 1991) in the New Literacy Studies (NLS) field takes a critical but pragmatic view of the constructedness of literacy in particular contexts:

What has come to be termed the ‘New Literacy Studies’...represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice. This entails the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power. NLS, then, takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking ‘whose literacies’ are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant. (Street, 2003: 77)

From this approach, I incorporate the position that literacy is a social construction that is context-specific and open to negotiation. New media literacy it is not a ‘thing’—it is not a set of objectively definable skills that can be possessed by individual subjects, but a locally and historically specific, socially constructed field of negotiation and practice. However, in order to understand new media literacy in relation to cultural agency, it is still possible—and necessary—to talk about the cultural, social and technological *competencies* of individual users relative to particular social identity groups, and I do so in this thesis.

Following on logically from this first principle, neither is there one ‘thing’ called literacy, but rather there are multiple literacies. In applying these principles to new media participation, I focus particularly on *creative* and *network* literacies. The

concept of ‘creative literacies’ gestures towards the fact that content creation is now recognised as a crucial area of adult new media literacy (Livingstone et al., 2005), but it also encompasses an orientation towards technology that favours experimentation in order to achieve social and cultural goals (Burgess, 2006: 107), rather than banal competence that serves formulaic or instrumental goals (as in, for example, schooling students in the creation of Excel spreadsheets). The idea of ‘network literacy’ as I use it here is largely inspired by Jill Walker’s (2005) use of the term in relation to blogging. For Walker, it means:

linking to what other people have written and inviting comments from others...understanding a kind of writing that is a social, collaborative process rather than an act of an individual in solitary. (Walker, 2005: 118)

My discussions of literacy will not be primarily concerned with ‘formal’ literacy, such as policies and practices in regard to K-12 education, instead focusing on extramural and informal, or what may be called vernacular literacy. Just as it is possible to speak of ‘vernacular creativity’ as a field of cultural production that is outside of but still operates in relation to the institutional frameworks of the art world, it is also possible to talk about ‘vernacular literacies’. In suggesting the term

‘vernacular literacies’ I draw to some extent on work that approaches everyday, informal engagement with new media from a literacy point of view (See especially Knobel & Lankshear, 1997; Knobel, 1999; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002). There are two levels to this concept which follow from the duality of literacy as both a *field of contestation* and a *site of practice*, as outlined above. That is, it is possible to talk about ‘vernacular literacies’ in regard to content creation—the range of everyday competencies that constitute what people already ‘do’ creatively, and the local, social contexts in which those practices are embedded. Secondly, sites of vernacular creativity, especially at moments of perceived technological ‘newness’, are also the location for vernacular *theories* (McLaughlin, 1996) of literacy—where ideas about what counts as literacy, and the necessary competencies, are negotiated, taught and learned in everyday practice, using vernacular terminology. Vernacular literacy is especially relevant at moments of media transition such as the present one because conventions and norms tend to be constructed and stabilised in informal learning contexts long before they are adopted and instrumentalised by the institutions of formal education, as we have seen in the case of blogging, for example (Burgess, 2006). The focus on informal creative literacies also draws attention to the roles that technologists, designers, and the market play in teaching users how to use the tools of vernacular creativity—indeed, in suggesting what they are ‘for’, and thereby operating as powerful actors in the construction of new literacies.

Usability, Hackability and Playability

The position on technology outlined above holds that technologies at least to some extent teach us what they are *for*. Accordingly, it is the socio-technical construction

of literacy that I focus on most in this chapter. One of the most important dynamics of the socio-technical construction of literacy in design, representation and use is the tension between two ideological extremes: at one end is what I call extreme *hackability*—where a given technology is perceived and presented as open-ended, manipulable and affording complex experimentation with an accompanying level of difficulty; at the other end is extreme *usability*—where a technology is perceived and presented as allowing easy access to a pre-determined set of simple operations.

The apparent opposition of usability and hackability is linked to the unresolved tensions between the ideologies of critical modernism and postmodern populism. According to these respective ideologies, hackability, as an ideal, permits rational mastery and understanding of the technical ‘reality’ of machines; while usability permits popular access without the need for esoteric knowledge, by creating pleasurable surface interfaces that automate operations on the underlying layers of technology. It is my position that in the process of technological stabilisation and mass adoption, it is always the case that some balance between usability and hackability is reached and appears to become stabilised at least as far as the dominant meanings of the technology are concerned. But the tensions between these two competing dynamics are never finally resolved, opening up possibilities for usable technologies that are also expansible, adaptable, and malleable. Further, even the most apparently ‘seamless’ technologies are always hackable by someone. By definition, usable technologies are those that quickly and clearly communicate their basic affordances; however, even the most usable technologies may consist of great complexity and offer creative possibilities that extend far beyond those basic uses. Cars, for example, are usable: their basic ‘affordance’—the dominant invited use—is

the conveyance of the driver and passengers ‘from A to B’, a use easily achieved once the driver has acquired the skills needed to operate the vehicle. But as the rich creativity and performativity of car enthusiasts and modified-car cultures demonstrate (Fuller, 2006; McRae, 2006), cars—as cultural objects, and not only ‘things’—are also hackable in unanticipated and transformative ways. Dan Hill (2006) gives the additional example of an electric guitar:

Electric guitars quickly communicate their operational ‘noise-making’ components; while these instruments take a lifetime to master, their approachability means that a wide range of interaction is possible within minutes. And their obvious ‘seams’ clearly enable hackability, as witnessed in the vast numbers of guitars customised in apparently infinitely ways. (Hill, 2006)

It is easier to see how this works in the case of ‘hardware’ like cars and guitars. But when thinking about software (and the increasing convergence of hardware and software, as in mobile devices), while a particular device or application might offer a huge range of configurable options at the interface layer, almost no adaptation or modification of the software itself is possible without a mastery of the *code* upon which it is based. This issue has provoked the emergence of normative arguments reconfiguring hackability as a design ethic that subverts the dominant ethic of ‘seamless’ usability in order to re-open technologies to user agency, rather than closing them off to all but the most technologically aware and competent users (Galloway et al., 2004).

In thinking about how these dynamics might apply to the problem of agency in digital culture, Julian Kücklich (2004) has suggested a thoroughly postmodern term for these negotiations—*playability*—that translates across to new media from the specific area of game studies. The notion of playability in some ways avoids the binary opposition between usability and hackability, even though Kücklich does not use the terms ‘usability’ or ‘hackability’ himself. Indeed, the example of the electric guitar given above demonstrates the way that playability offers the user a range of pathways between immediate access (usability) and extensive adaptation or experimentation (hackability). While I gesture towards the idea of play in this chapter, it is not until the following chapter on the Flickr photo-sharing network that it is fully introduced. In that chapter, I discuss the ways in which Flickr’s interface and the structure of its architecture are typical of many of the most popular contemporary new media contexts, especially game environments, in that the richness of their affordances comes from a high level of playability.

In the following sections of this chapter, I unpack the complexity of the processes by which the historical shifts in practices of vernacular creativity and the historical development of technologies have converged to produce and constrain new mainstream forms of cultural participation. First, I discuss how this played out in the case of the domestication of photography, beginning with the preconditions for the so-called ‘Kodak moment’.

4. Kodak and the Mass Popularisation of Photography

Amateur Photography Before Kodak

The classic picture of the Victorian amateur is that of the leisured and educated gentleman, a non-specialist but multi-skilled cultural participant who was capable of both producing and appreciating music, art, and experimental science, personified in reality by the figure of William Henry Fox Talbot, experimental photographer, amateur scientist, and inventor of the calotype process. Under this construction, amateur achievement was both a marker of the middle classes' leisured status (symbolic capital) and of their cultivation, taste, and moral worth (cultural capital). In the early phases of its development photography was a 'fit' with the values and social practices of Victorian amateurism because of the scientific, technical, and artistic knowledges and competencies that any aspiring photographer needed to master in order to participate. In Victorian England, the alliance between a leisured, educated class and a photography successfully legitimated as an art-science was more pronounced than in America (Sternberger, 2001: xx-xxi). In order to gain artistic legitimacy, American amateur photography had to carefully align itself with art to the exclusion of science and technology—which was understood in nationalistic, industrial, democratic terms (Nye, 1994) and was therefore the antithesis of the refined individual sensibilities associated with art (Levine, 1988). Pamela Inglesby (1995) describes the ways in which the art world of the late nineteenth century fought to maintain the symbolic boundaries between art and photography by focusing on the 'mechanical' and technical production of images as opposed to the 'creative' process of painting. Thus, photography's status as art was

denied on the basis of its ties to the empirical: like engineering, it was an ‘art science’ and not a ‘fine art’ (Sternberger, 2001: 13). This distinction was contested, but it is through this process of contestation that photography was legitimised as an art form.

Operating in relation to the contested symbolic boundaries between legitimate art and photography, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and especially in the United States photographic societies and clubs dominated by the ‘pictorialists’ were preoccupied with ‘art’ photography, using painting as an aesthetic model. These societies and salons were careful to distinguish themselves from both the professional photographers and the ‘mass amateur’ photographers taking up the innovations of box cameras (Griffin, 1995; Hassner, 1987). However, as is the case for amateur film, the apparently unmediated representations created by amateur photographers have always had connotations of authenticity; further, amateur photographers were especially important to the development of realist genres such as documentary photography, particularly social documentary photography, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century (Hassner, 1987: 80). But until the very end of the nineteenth century, even ‘amateur’ photography was very much a minority pursuit.

The Kodak Moment

The Kodak camera, introduced in 1888 in combination with Eastman’s flexible film technologies, made the practice of photography accessible to a huge market—a market which George Eastman deliberately set out to create (Jenkins, 1975: 13), not only supplying photographic film and cameras, but also establishing a network of

developing centres, thereby gaining a near monopoly over almost the entire production process of photographic images. The significance of this development goes beyond the establishment of an industrial monopoly; in the ‘Kodak moment’, the entire social, technological and aesthetic system of photography was reconfigured.

While working as a bank clerk, George Eastman, who was a keen amateur photographer for three years before entering the industry, developed and patented his own process for automating the ‘dry plate’ gelatin emulsion process (Jenkins, 1975: 3), going on to patent the flexible roll film system in the early 1880s (Jenkins, 1975: 7). While the roll film system proved cumbersome to use in existing cameras, the innovation was initially received with great enthusiasm by the photographic community. However, professional photographers did not take it up, preferring to persist with individual control over the entire process of photography—the roll film innovation was actually considered a failure. Eastman stated on the record that he realised at this point that ‘in order to make a large business we would have to reach the general public and create a new class of patrons’ (quoted in Jenkins, 1975). In order to achieve this, Eastman reconceptualised the system of photography, separating it into three segments: the production of photosensitive materials; the capturing of images by exposing photosensitive materials in a camera; and the process of developing, fixing, and eventually printing a positive image on paper. The Eastman company was already actively pursuing the first and last of these steps, but in order to create a mass market, a camera-and-film system needed to be developed that would easily enable non-expert users to expose images (Jenkins, 1975: 12-14). The first Kodak camera, a simple hand-held box and lens with a roll

holder at the back of the box and a button on the side to control the shutter mechanism, was released onto the market in 1888 (Coe, 1973). The Kodak achieved Eastman's ambition to create the preconditions of a mass market for photography, delivering a photographic system that 'would place all of the complexities of photography in the hands of the manufacturer and a simple camera in the hands of nearly everyone six years or older' (Jenkins, 1975: 12-14). By segmenting the system of photography into three discrete elements, only one of which (exposing the film) was the domain of the ordinary photographer, Eastman redefined photography as a technology, a cultural practice, and an industry. Eastman Kodak became the *cultural leader* of photography in the United States and beyond, a position that was gained because of the company's 'unique expertise and producer's power' in the context of the relative newness of the technology (Kotchemidova, 2005: 3).

By 1900, one in ten people in Britain owned a camera, and by 1902 Kodak was producing 80-90 per cent of the world's output of film (McQuire, 1998: 55). In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the development of the hand camera and 'instantaneous' photography reconfigured the amateur user. It was at this point that Kodak's slogan, 'You press the button, we do the rest' came to 'define the territory for domestic photography' (McQuire, 1998: 55). Although there were other key players in Europe as well as the United States, Eastman was at the centre of a series of interrelated technological and conceptual changes which resulted in the complete transformation of *what* and *who* photography was for. As an industry, photography was transformed from a decentralised, handicraft-based mode to a centralised, mechanised one (Jenkins, 1975). As a cultural practice, photography was transformed from a specialist, enthusiast-centred art science to a mass-popular,

domesticated everyday leisure activity. But what are the cultural politics of this shift? Did the mass amateurisation of photography equate to its democratisation?

John Tagg (1988) argues that the wide availability of inexpensive photographic equipment and processing services do not equate to the 'democratisation' of photography in the sense of a collapse or inversion of the structures of cultural agency and authority that had existed when access to the means of photographic production had been restricted to a smaller number of people with the money and leisure to pursue photography. Rather:

The emergence of a mass amateur base or, perhaps more accurately, the production of a new consumer body for photography did not represent a challenge to the existing power relations of cultural practice. In fact, it may have furthered their solidification'. (Tagg, 1988: 17)

This is because large-scale amateur photography was dependent on, and 'produced' by, large-scale centralised production of equipment and materials, along with which came standardised highly mechanised processes, and 'elaborate divisions of labour' within those industries. Tagg sees these developments as 'opposed to democratic dispersal.'

As in the general cultural sphere, the hierarchisation of photographic practices rested on the historical development of distinct economies, institutional bases and secondary supportive structures. [...] As we have seen, popular amateur photography would not have been possible without the development of a large-scale photographic industry, fostering the emergence and domination of international corporations

such as Eastman Kodak. The corporate stage of production was both the condition of existence of popular photography and its limit. (Tagg, 1988: 19)

Only a very small part of the process of producing an image was actually in the hands of the amateur: ‘the instrument that was handed over was, of this necessity, very limited, and the kinds of images it could produce were therefore severely restricted on the technical plane alone’ (Tagg, 1988: 17). Second, even though a piece of equipment that was part of the production chain of photography was made available, the ‘necessary knowledges’ were not: ‘technical knowledge about the camera was not dispersed but remained in the hands of specialist technicians, themselves dependent on a means of production they did not own or control’ (Tagg, 1988: 17). Third, the institutional spaces and signifying codes of popular photography were narrowly restricted (e.g. the conventional portrait pose, the family and its leisure). The development of copyright and patent arrangements which protected and gave status to ‘artistic conception’ (as against ‘formulaic’ photography) and technical innovation (the invention of equipment and processes) at the same time constructed a hierarchy with mere ‘operators’ of photographic equipment—the domestic or casual amateur photographers without artistic aspirations—at the bottom. Tagg finally argues that the possibilities for photography’s liberation from its subordinate position in institutionalised hierarchies of legitimacy seem to lie only in the potential of the individual photographer to make the transition from amateur to professional or art status.

However, the implicitly negative connotations of Tagg's statement that 'the corporate stage of production was both the condition of existence of popular photography and its limit' could just as easily be inverted by saying instead that the limits on photography created by the corporate stage of production made popular photography possible. In fact, both statements are true. Kodak's slogan, 'you press the button, we do the rest', which came to define vernacular photography, is both an open invitation to participation and the pronouncement of technological closure: picture-taking became accessible to everyone, but the camera itself became a black box, and the art and science of developing and printing became a mystery to the majority of users. Photography itself was transformed from an expert, inaccessible system to an accessible but externally controlled one: photography as a technology was usable, but not hackable.

Kodak as cultural leader

As Don Slater (1991) succinctly puts it, Kodak grew 'by selling the very idea of photography to the public'. At the same time, through its advertising and 'how-to' manuals, it is no exaggeration to say that Kodak largely came to dominate the very *definition* of vernacular photography, and therefore vernacular photographic literacy for the United States and beyond. Kodak taught us not only that anyone *could* and *should* take photographs, but also where and when and how to take photographs, in relation to shifting ideological constructions of modernity, leisure, domesticity and gender (West, 2000).

From the beginning of the twentieth century, the market for cameras was expanded through Kodak's advertising and editorial activities, with women targeted on the

basis of the Kodak's ease of use, especially as an aid to family memory (Walton, 2002: 36), and tourists (especially bicycle tourists) on the basis of its portability (Nead, 2004: 73). The deliberate construction of a mass market for photography coincided with the dominance of magazines over media culture in the first half of the twentieth century; Kodak's products and services were advertised heavily in national magazines and newspapers from their entry onto the market in the late nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth century. Kodak also published books and pamphlets on popular photography, and sponsored trade journals. These photographic publications reinforced the segmentation of the market into amateurs, who needed 'simple' explanations, and professionals, who needed to understand how to combine business and technical 'artistry' (Kotchemidova, 2005: 4). Kodak also ran international popular photography contests open to 'amateurs only' (Kotchemidova, 2005: 17; Taylor, 1994). At the beginning, these competitions were clearly designed simply to encourage the mass take-up of photography. In the biggest of these early competitions, held in 1931 across eighty-nine countries, Kodak-enabled amateur photography, as opposed to dry plate professional or pro-am photography, was emphatically framed as instantaneous and effortless: 'no technical skill' was required, as 'subject interest only [would] count' (Taylor, 1994: 38).

The feminisation of photography involved its discursive 'softening'; at the same time, the mass popularisation of the technology at the turn of the century coincided with the reconfiguration of gender roles and the emergence of the 'modern woman' as an ideal (Gover, 1988). In magazine advertising and promotional posters, the 'Kodak Girl' was Kodak's primary sales icon for the first half of the twentieth century and beyond (West, 2000). Out and about, stylishly dressed with lightweight,

portable camera in hand, the Kodak Girl was both the ideal subject and object of photography. She represented the convergence of modernity, freedom and leisure with photography as an everyday practice: everyday photography was no longer art or science, but instead was structured by a *play ethic* emphasising ‘simplicity, experimentation and fun’ (Kotchemidova, 2005: 6).

Magazine advertising and editorials offered Kodak the perfect opportunity to demonstrate what its technologies and services were to be used for – ‘making pictures just like the ones on the page’ (Kotchemidova, 2005: 10). Kodak advertisements therefore not only modelled the techniques of ‘good’ photography, but also the proper *subjects* of popular photography and how they should be represented. The result was a Kodak-defined snapshot aesthetic in which the idealisation of a particular version of everyday life mirrored the semiotic codes of advertising. As Kotchemidova (2005) argues, one of the most stable features of this aesthetic was the ‘toothy grin’. The normative elements of this aesthetic can of course be resisted—but normative they remain, as demonstrated by the ways in which the wayward subject of a family photograph who refuses to say ‘cheese’ will be cajoled into delivering the smile after all, so as not to ‘ruin’ the photograph. It is perhaps for this reason that the ‘found’ vintage photographs most prized by collectors and curators today are subversions of this aesthetic—especially when they are ‘bad’ photographs that are the result of mysterious photographic ‘accidents’, or when they are representations of the most mundane everyday tasks and activities (Coe, 1989). It is the oddness or wrongness of these found photographs that made them ‘findable’ in the first place, because the *good* wedding photographs, holiday snaps or family portraits are preserved in albums and handed down the generations;

it is the *bad* photographs that are thrown away (Smith, 2001). In between the professional world of photography and the domestic snapshot were the camera clubs, where aesthetic and technical ‘rules’ for good photography were reinforced, taught and learned in extramural learning environments; the slavish rule-bound devotion to these aesthetic norms is, in contemporary contexts, what marks amateur photography as distinctive both from the vernacular snapshot and from art photography, each of which disobeys these rules, albeit with different reasons and with different effects.

As is the case in any process of technological stabilisation, things could have been otherwise for photography, and in Europe the initial mass amateurisation of photography took a different direction than it did in the Kodak-dominated North American, British and Australian markets. The European ‘moment’ came with the introduction of the Leica camera by Leitz in the 1930s. Leitz did not advertise the camera heavily, instead relying on a diffuse word-of-mouth marketing strategy beginning with quasi-scientific social groups such as microscope salesmen, and progressing to camera dealers (Keller, 1989). In 1930s Germany most photographers did their own developing and printing, so the Kodak slogan ‘You push the button, we do the rest’ did not apply there; instead, technophilic users had to be convinced of the technical advantages of the camera, rather than the *fun* that could be had with it. The company hired keen photography enthusiasts and well-known photographers to evangelise on their behalf. When Leica advertisements did appear in print publications, they mainly featured the camera itself as a technological object, and rarely portrayed ‘consumers delighting in camera use’ (Kotchemidova, 2005: 20). The underlying ethic of the Leica version of photography, then, retained the modernist, scientific ideals of precision, work, and truth, rather than the

postmodernist ones of play, fun and performance that defined the Kodak version of popular photography and the 'snapshot aesthetic'.

The mass amateurisation of photography did not go uncontested, despite its eventual normalisation. Nead (2004) points out that it was amateurs who made up the majority of documentary and street photographers and filmmakers, 'lying in wait' with their hand cameras at the ready, provoking a kind of moral panic and renegotiations around the right to privacy in public places (see also Inglesby, 1995; and Mensel, 1991). This crisis of legitimacy around the mass documentation of 'private' individuals in public space is echoed in debates over the use of mobile phone cameras today (Harkin, 2003). Once they were exposed, developed and printed, however, the vernacular *uses* of photographs were developed at the margins and beyond the control of the system of photography created and shaped by the photographic industry. For example, although albums were sold in photography stores, their appropriation by consumers often exceeded their 'intended' uses. In an extended discussion of the vernacular photograph as material object, Geoffrey Batchen (2001) explores the rich and excessive tactility and narrativisation of the vernacular photo album, as well as the ways in which photographs are used as ornaments, the ways in which they are displayed in the home, and the way they form part of the practices of the vernacular bricoleur as elements of the scrapbook. Batchen discusses the many ways in which vernacular photography encompasses and amplifies the 'thingness' of photographic objects, through framing, mounting on glass, the creation of jewellery that incorporated photographs, and so on. The 'gridding' of photographs—in multi-photo frames, on domestic walls—provides them with 'the unmistakable structure of narrative, with the declared capacity to tell

a story' (Batchen, 2001: 66). Even prior to its remediation in digital culture, then, the practice of vernacular photography did not end when each set of prints was picked up from the lab, but extended and amplified the articulation of everyday life, memory, material culture and embodiment.

5. Personal Computing, Apple and the 'Creative Consumer'

The Domestication of the Personal Computer

In contemporary developed societies, the everyday relationship of mainstream consumers to computer technologies is naturalised as one of enthusiasm and domestic integration. However, this positioning of the personal computer represents a dramatic shift from the 'original' meaning of the technology—and it is a shift that took only three decades of the late twentieth century. From the 1950s until the 1970s computers were institutionally owned and controlled by a small, closed group of expert scientists and technicians. In reality and in their media representations, computers were articulated to science and the military (Kirkpatrick, 2004: 25).

The early hacker movement that was primarily responsible for the innovations that evolved into what was then called the 'small computer' was characterised by an intense, hyper-rational engagement with technology, usually with the aim of 'getting the system to do something other than the function intended for it by its designer' (Kirkpatrick, 2004: 26). The movement was populated by highly individualistic, almost always male 'mavericks' connected to research and science institutions such as MIT who competed and, to some extent, collaborated to find the most 'elegant' solutions to computational problems (Levy, 1984). The hackers, like the early photographers, were both experts and enthusiasts—operating in a highly

individualistic way but philosophically engaged with the social or liberatory potential of computing. The public good for personal computing as imagined by hacker culture tended to be ubiquitous access and the democratisation of education and information; less emphasis was placed on personal expression or entertainment, even though for garage enthusiasts, ‘hacking’ clearly had its pleasures. Galloway et al (2004) sum up the principles around which the hacker ethic was, and continues to be, shaped:

...ensuring access to technology and knowledge about it; putting power in the hands of users; decentralizing control; protecting privacy; exceeding limitations; creating beauty; and doing no harm to people.

(Galloway et al, 2004: 2)

The following quote from the Homebrew Computer Club Newsletter published in 1975—the first year of the club’s operation—neatly encapsulates the hacker ethic:

By sharing our experience and exchanging tips we advance the state of the art and make low cost home computing possible for more folks
...Computers are not magic. And it is important for the general public to begin to understand the limits of these machines and that humans are responsible for the programming. (Homebrew Computer Club, 1975)

The idea of user agency embedded in the hacker ethic is still alive and well today in the philosophy of the open source software movement, as well as being reconfigured

in the more playful ‘DIY’ technology and craft movement metonymically represented by *Make Magazine*’s motto: ‘If you can’t open it, you don’t own it.’⁶

The beginning of the personal computer ‘revolution’ in the late 1970s and early 1980s was a period of technological and discursive diversity and instability. The market was crowded with competing machines, each with its own operating system and user interface. The early 1970s saw ideological contests erupt over the ‘meaning’ of the small computer: on one hand, they were viewed as delivering power to the people (the libertarian or radical hacker ethos); on the other, discourses of efficiency and rationalisation emanated from the business world. The early 1980s marked the beginning of the convergence of play and fun with literacy, technological mastery and technical knowledge. Once the ‘solutions outnumbered the problems’ (Kirkpatrick, 2004) games, music, and graphical applications began to receive more interest than they previously had. Early personal computing ideology was an unstable mix of hacker ideology and play—the emphasis for the ideal user addressed by advertisements for personal computers was on writing one’s own programs, games, or music, rather than ‘using’ provided applications.

This is particularly marked in the case of early personal computers like the Amiga, Atari and Commodore 64, whose marketing focused on the assumption that users would want to program music or games, and not just ‘passively’ play or use those created by others, and that the knowledge of computers *as* computers (and not as interfaces) was important and valuable. These literacy aspects of personal computing

⁶ See <http://makezine.com/>.

were often framed as being essential to the future success of children. The Amiga 1000, for example, was a multimedia personal computer with exceptional graphics performance for the time. In a television advertisement for the machine, while images of graphs, spreadsheets, games, and music composition appear on the screen, the voiceover frames the product as a way to ‘stand out from the crowd’ in a competitive world. The Amiga, the audience was told, ‘gives you undreamed of creative power’ to ‘work faster and more productive’ [sic] and was ‘the first personal computer to give you a creative edge’. In the advertisement and those like it from the period, individual business success and productivity are articulated to personal creativity and exceptional ‘ability’ (Commodore International, 1985) in a style resonant of the ‘success ethic’ that Traube (1989) identified in 1980s Hollywood cinema. Traube analysed the most successful of the Hollywood ‘success’ films from the Reagan era—including *Ferris Buehler’s Day Off*, *All the Right Moves*, and *The Secret of My Success*. She argues that the ‘fantasy embedded in the commercially successful success stories’ appeals to ‘the young corporate employees of today and tomorrow’, and interprets the films as ‘part of the making of the new middle classes’ (Traube, 1989: 273). This brings into sharp relief the argument that the ‘meaning’, and even the *uses* of technology, whether emergent and contested or relatively commonsense and stabilised, cannot be fully separated from the historical and cultural contexts in which the ‘things’ themselves are created, and in which the meanings and uses are constructed and represented.

While the success imperative as a reason for computer take-up was directed at young people, especially boys, in a parallel and slightly later 1980s trend ‘ordinary’ domestic users—particularly women—were schooled to adopt the computer as a

benign and useful home appliance. Lori Reed (2000) traces the processes through which computer technologies were disarticulated from science (or science fiction) and re-articulated to the home, thereby discursively transforming them from ‘cold, distant military war machines’ into ‘friendly’ home appliances (163). These discursive re-articulations ‘produced eventually accepted linkages to the home, family, business, and pleasure, such that today computer technologies are “naturally” integrated into many people’s daily lives’ (Reed, 2000: 161). Following Woolgar (1991), Reed’s approach to this topic focuses on the ways in which the computer and media industries ‘configure’ users, to achieve a relative naturalisation of what computers are for and who should use them. Reed acknowledges that this is an incomplete and contested configuration, but argues that unconventional uses are likely to be viewed as bizarre or threatening (Reed, 2000: 162). The media of reconfiguration included advice columns, marketing materials, and public dialogue about computers and the range of their risks, benefits and potential applications. Part of the move to mass-market and domesticate the personal computer, as with photography, involved feminisation—the computer was discursively ‘softened’. The cultural and industrial emphasis on women’s attitudes to computers was key for the ‘cajoling’ of computers into the hands of women and into the home. At the beginning of the domestication process, the reluctance to take up computing was constructed as a ‘phobia’ by the media. Once the process of widespread domestication was complete and home users had begun to integrate computing into their everyday lives in ways that were not prescribed, there was a shift into discourses of computer ‘addiction’, once again centred around women (Reed, 2000). We can see the same trajectory in the initial years of the mass take-up of Internet

use, and today in moral panics around the overuse or misuse of mobile phone technologies, especially by young people (Harkin, 2003; Ito & Okabe, 2005; McKay et al., 2005).

One of the most significant developments in this time was the normalisation of the Graphical User Interface, or the GUI in the mid-1980s. This triumph of the interface designers (the postmodern populists) over the hardware-and-code oriented hackers (the modernist avant-garde) resulted in a complete redefinition of technological transparency. Whereas for the hackers, transparency meant visibility and openness at all levels of hardware and code so that users might learn and fully master the computer, ‘user-friendly’ interface design principles redefined transparency to mean the *invisibility* of all technological layers, leaving only the graphical user interface, so that there was nothing standing between the will of the user and the task for which he or she wished to use the computer. This redefinition of ‘transparency’ is now normative, at least in interface design, as reflected in Bolter & Gromala’s (2006) statement that:

When designers set out to define an interface for an application...they usually assume that the interface should serve as a transparent window, presenting the user with an information workspace without interference or distortion. They expect the user to focus on the task, not the interface itself...If the application calls attention to itself or intrudes into the user’s conscious consideration, this is usually considered a design flaw.
(Bolter & Gromala, 2006: 375)

This philosophy does, however, lead to usability by larger groups of consumers; to once again subvert Tagg's (1988) complaint about the mass amateurisation of photography, while the ethic of seamless usability represented by the GUI is at least superficially the limit of popular personal computing, it is also its condition of possibility. This positive view of usability—as a means of making complexity accessible without reducing it to simplicity—is expressed in Donald Norman's (1999) *The Invisible Computer*, which, along with his earlier work (Norman et al., 1986) has been extremely influential over the field of human-computer interaction. In summary, the domestication of personal computing represents a major cultural and technological transition that was achieved not only by designers and technologists, but also by markets, advertising and media discourse. The meaning and the uses of the computer were transformed: from hackable war machine; to usable home appliance; and now, to mundane, mobile and ubiquitous personal technology, whose profound complexity is harnessed for everyday use via software interfaces that mediate between the will of the user and the functionality of the machine.

The iLife Suite and the Evolution of the Apple Brand

Apple's iLife software suite comes bundled with all new Apple computers, and has become a central part of Apple's branding strategy. The suite contains software for imaging (iPhoto), video production and editing (iMovie), DVD creation (iDVD), and as of 2004 and 2005 respectively, music production (GarageBand) and web publishing (iWeb). iLife advertisements feature prominently at key entry points to Apple's website, and Apple has promoted each new version of the suite intensively (see for example Apple Computer, 2004a). The emphasis on software for creative production is in keeping with Apple's historic construction of their user base as an especially 'creative' and aware 'brand community' (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The Apple brand is one of the most recognisable and coherent in contemporary global capitalism, and the exceptional devotion and productive creativity of Apple fans is celebrated and extensively documented in a recent book by *Wired Magazine's* resident 'Cult of Mac' journalist, Leander Kahner (2004b). However, this software suite and the marketing around it are also representative of a relatively recent shift in Apple's branding strategy that constructs its users as effortlessly creative rather than extraordinarily so. In the 2006-2007 'Get a Mac' campaign, which targets 'switchers' from the PC to the Apple computer market, one of the key differentiating factors is the iLife suite. In the list of fourteen reasons that the reader 'will love a Mac', the promise of access to creativity offered by the machine—'you can make amazing stuff'—ranks second only to the promise of effortless usability—'it just works'. More specifically, the user is invited to make 'stuff' with the aid of the iLife software suite:

If you've ever wanted to make a movie, publish your own podcast, create gorgeous coffee-table books, produce a Hollywood-style DVD, state your views in a daily blog, make beautiful music, or any combination of the above, you've definitely come to the right place.

To iLife to be exact.

With the phrase 'you can make amazing stuff', each and every potential user ('you') is invited to participate in bona fide creative practice that is well within the range of competencies of the ordinary consumer, but that will nevertheless result in bona fide 'creative' outputs ('amazing stuff', 'Hollywood-style DVDs', 'beautiful music') that have value beyond the intrinsic pleasures of participation, and convert to objects of cultural value. How did it come to be that bona fide 'creativity' became naturalised as an attribute of the ideal *ordinary* user of the Apple personal computer in this way?

The 18-page brochure insert (Apple Computer, 1983) which introduced the GUI and mouse equipped Macintosh in 1983, told us that, 'of the 235 million people in America, only a fraction can use a computer'. Page two announced: 'Introducing Macintosh. For the rest of us.' The infamous '1984' commercial that announced the impending release of the Macintosh emphasised the freedom from corporate conformity (represented by IBM) that would be delivered by the Macintosh's superior *usability*. The commercial aired on January 22, 1984 during a break in the third quarter of the Super Bowl. It portrayed a young heroine wearing orange shorts, red running shoes, and a white tank top with a picture of Apple's Macintosh computer on it, running through a dark world populated by drones, and eventually

hurling a sledgehammer at a television image of Big Brother (a thinly veiled reference to IBM). The advertisement concluded with the message: ‘On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like “1984”’. From the beginning, Apple focused on this very particular construction of human-centred and populist usability above all else. The Apple Human Interface Guidelines, still available in an updated form on the Apple Developers website, are a clear articulation of the way Apple’s ideology of usability is heavily coded with transparency and simplicity, in ways that run directly counter to the idea of hackability:

Avoid Feature Cascade

If you are developing a simple application, it can be very tempting to add features that aren’t wholly relevant to the original intent of the program. This feature cascade can lead to a bloated interface that is slow and difficult to use because of its complexity. Try to stick to the original intent of your program and include only features that are relevant to the main workflow.

The best products aren’t the ones with the most features. The best products are those whose features are tightly integrated with the solutions they provide, making them the most usable.

Apply the 80 Percent Solution

During the design process, if you discover problems with your product design, you might consider applying the 80 percent solution—that is, designing your software to meet the needs of at least 80 percent of your

users. This type of design typically favors simpler, more elegant approaches to problems.

If you try to design for the 20 percent of your target audience who are power users, your design may not be usable by the other 80 percent of users. Even though that smaller group of power users is likely to have good ideas for features, the majority of your user base may not think in the same way. Involving a broad range of users in your design process can help you find the 80 percent solution. (Apple Computer, 2006a)

From the late 1980s, Apple capitalised on the perception of the superior performance and graphics processing power of the Mac (and Apple's partnership with Adobe software) to concentrate on the creative professionals market (such as graphic designers and musicians), by association also interpellating 'ordinary' users who aspired to creative practice. In this period, 'the power to be your best' was the usual slogan in Apple's television advertising.

Apple's late 1990s 'Think Different' advertising campaign (Apple Computer, 1997), which coincided with the return to Apple of co-founder Steve Jobs and the release of the PowerMac, reinforced the construction of both the Apple brand and Apple's users as exceptionally creative and non-conformist. The one-minute television commercial that was at the centre of this campaign featured black and white video footage of historical figures including Albert Einstein, Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard Branson, John Lennon, R. Buckminster Fuller, Thomas Edison,

Muhammad Ali, Ted Turner, Maria Callas, Mahatma Gandhi, Amelia Earhart, Alfred Hitchcock, Martha Graham, Jim Henson (with Kermit the Frog), Frank Lloyd Wright and Picasso. There were also several 'one person' versions of the advertisement, with a common voiceover:

Here's to the crazy ones

The misfits.

The rebels.

The troublemakers.

The round pegs in the square holes.

The ones who see things differently.

They're not fond of rules

And they have no respect for the status quo.

You can praise them, disagree with them, quote them, disbelieve them, glorify or vilify them.

About the only thing that you can't do is ignore them.

Because they change things.

They invent. They imagine. They heal.

They explore. They create. They inspire.

They push the human race forward.

Maybe they have to be crazy.

How else can you stare at an empty canvas and see a work of art?

Or sit in silence and hear a song that's never been written?

Or gaze at a red planet and see a laboratory on wheels?

We make tools for these kinds of people.

While some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius.

Because the people who are crazy enough to think that they can change
the world, are the ones who do.

The advertisements that make up the 'Think Different' campaign all relied upon a three-step process of metaphoric transference: like Einstein, Picasso and Ali, Apple is creative, non-conformist and innovative; through the slogan 'think different' these qualities of distinction are offered to the user. A distinctly Romantic construction of creativity permeates these advertisements: those who 'think different' are crazy, nonconformists, and geniuses—there is nothing ordinary about them; however it is possible for ordinary people, with the aid of the right tools, to aspire to *extraordinariness*.

In a move that explicitly differentiated the Apple Macintosh from the generic 'beige' Windows PC, Apple targeted the mass market with renewed vigour with the release of the iMac in 1998. The design of the machine, and its representation in advertising, marketing and media discourse, represented the radical aestheticisation of ordinary personal computing—the iMac, with its transparent all-in-one case in a range of bright colours (with names like tangerine and grape appealing to the sensation of taste), housing both monitor and computer, was explicitly designed to

create the impression that a convergence of fun, pleasure, and processing power had occurred and that it was unique to the iMac. It was more than a 'pretty' material object, however; the iMac in combination with the Mac OS also represented a radical ethic of usability characterised by the seamless integration of hardware, operating system and applications. The Apple slogan that captures this repositioning of the brand proclaimed that computing, iMac style, was 'chic, not geek' (iMaculate, 1999).

The early 2000s advertising campaigns that coincided with Apple's mass-marketing of the iMac for a general rather than specialised user community advocated a more active, even subversive form of consumption; however, there was little sense in which the user was constructed as *productively* creative. In the 'Rip. Mix. Burn' television advertisement that aired in the US to promote the release of iTunes (Apple Computer, 2001), a young male user seated in an empty auditorium demonstrates the ease of creating music playlists by instructing the real-life celebrity musicians assembled on stage as to which songs they should perform and when. This advertisement explicitly reconfigures the practice of music consumption as the active exercise of knowledgeable taste and consumer agency. With the extensive consumer adoption of the iPod and the success of the 'Switch' campaign, where celebrities and 'ordinary people' alike relate their personal accounts of the many advantages of owning a Mac, the Apple brand community has become even less exclusive. It could be argued that the ideal Apple user is becoming increasingly 'ordinary' while continuing to represent the ideal creative consumer from the perspective of the consumer technology industries.

Continuing in this direction, the 2006 -2007 series of twenty ‘Get a Mac’ television advertisements⁷ directly personified the Macintosh and the IBM compatible PC. The advertisements feature actor Justin Long as a Mac and author and humorist John Hodgman (The Daily Show) as a PC (presumably running Windows). In each advertisement Long introduces himself as a Mac and Hodgman introduces himself as a PC, then a particular aspect of computing is set up as the basis for comparison.

In these advertisements, the result of the personification of the brands is that the boundary between the lifeworld of the user and the technology is dissolved; complete convergence is achieved. Both of the personified computers are white (although it could be argued that it is only the PC who is actually *marked* as white), male and vaguely middle-class North Americans. Neither is marked as culturally ‘different’; the Mac is simply a *better* class of ‘geek’—breezily confident, even smug, and seamlessly integrating everyday life, leisure, creativity and work; the PC is arrogant, spiteful and jealous, is trapped in Old Economy models of productivity, and appears physically bloated, with bad hair and an unfashionable business suit.

Illustrating this new convergence of ordinariness, creativity, and the particular construction of technology represented by the Apple brand, the iLife promotional videos that accompanied the launch of the software suite in 2004 explicitly constructed creativity as something as everyday as it was cool; the ‘ideal’ user was directly represented, whereas the earlier campaigns did not directly locate a fully

⁷ All of the advertisements in the campaign released to date are archived on the Apple website at <http://www.apple.com/getamac/ads/>

formed capacity for creativity in the ordinary user. In the iLife '04 promotional video, hosted by MTV's Ian Robinson (Apple Computer, 2004b), play and productivity are not divided—if we are to identify with the host of the video, it is both 'fun' and our 'mission in life' to create content.

The marketing information that accompanied the launch of iLife in Jan 2003 highlights the link between usability and creative expression:

Let your imagination soar: The iLife software applications let you do fun, creative things with your pictures, music and movies in ways that PC users can only dream about — and then you share your joy with family and friends every which way, from email and the Internet to print and DVD.

And you can do all these things and more quite nicely without thumbing through a manual. It's all part of the iLife experience. (Apple Computer, 2003a)

The constructions of both creativity and usability at work here rely on a particularly notion of technological transparency: the software *lets* you 'do fun, creative things' that are a direct expression of an inner urge to create; the need to develop specialist expertise in order to *do* those creative things is erased, because they can be achieved 'without thumbing through a manual'.

The iLife suite represents the continued extension of the Apple brand into everyday life; and even the convergence of the brand's identity with that of the Mac user. However, the iLife suite is distinguished from Apple's professional music and video production software applications—while the ordinary user is light-heartedly invited

to make movies ‘just like Hollywood’, the uses of the software are clearly designated as belonging to the domain of everyday life, fun and leisure, and the discourses of creativity around these uses work to keep the iLife user quite separate from the world of professional film production and distribution:

When you’re ready to share your jaw-dropping movies with friends and family, iDVD and iWeb have you covered. Make professional-looking widescreen DVDs with ease. The beautiful themes, polished menus, and smooth transitions in iDVD will dazzle and delight your toughest critics.

Your friends will hardly realize they sat through vacation photos and home movies. (Apple Computer, 2006b)

The graphical user interfaces of the iLife suite amplify features of the Mac OS X Aqua GUI such as candy-coloured, transparent, and dynamic elements, which create impressions of spatial depth and instantaneous, responsive gameplay. The metaphors for operations and commands in each application are drawn not from the professions attached to each cultural form, but from everyday life. For example, instead of the traditional file ‘export’ command, which in iMovie would render the movie and convert it into Quicktime format, the vernacular term ‘share’ is used. This is more than a usability issue, however. The discourse around the iLife suite at the beginning assumed that users would have private or domestic, and not public motivations for content creation. The idea of contributing to landscapes of public culture is not closed off, but neither is it constructed as a primary goal. With the increased attention to podcasting, however, has come built-in features for creating video and audio podcasts in GarageBand and iMovie. The addition of iWeb, which automates

the creation and updating of content-rich weblogs, to the software suite further expanded the idea that content might be shared with the ‘world’ rather than only with close relatives and ‘friends’.

Like Kodak in the first half of the twentieth century, Apple operates as a ‘cultural leader’ for everyday digital content creation. Also like Kodak, this cultural leadership is not limited to the narrow confines of the consumer electronics market and extends into formal and informal education. For example, in September 2003, the company announced the winners of the ‘Apple iLife Educator Awards’ for the year, recognizing ‘the most innovative uses of iLife’ in the K-12 classroom (Apple Computer, 2003b).

The iLife suite represents a key ‘moment’ in the development of the ‘creative consumer’ as an ideal user of technologies designed for everyday use. The social attributes of the creative consumer are articulated to a particular resolution of the dynamic tensions between ‘usability’ and ‘hackability’ in design. The iLife suite also represents a key point of convergence between play and productivity in the ethos of everyday computer use, and a blurring of the divide between professional creative *production* and everyday technological ‘consumption’. The discursive construction of vernacular creativity in relation to the Apple brand therefore contributes to the production of a new ideal personal computer user who does not need to ‘master his tools’, as Illich (1973) might say, but rather enjoys using them playfully, producing and repurposing content that emerges seamlessly out of the articulation of fun, creativity, technology, and his or her everyday experience.

As with the mass amateurisation of photography, the emphasis on seamless creative production enabled by easy-to-use and attractive technologies has not gone uncontested. Of all the applications included in the iLife suite, it was GarageBand that attracted the most discussion and debate. An enthusiastic user contributed the following comment to one of the many discussions that occurred around the time of GarageBand's release:

I was in a working band for ten years, then went back to my day job, that was seven years ago. I messed around with permanently crashing PCs and could never fathom out how to use Cubase. Now, I've had GB for a month and have produced an albums worth of pro sounding dance tracks, without using any Apple loops, I use the Soundtrack Loop Utility to get my drums in order and have never looked back. It's got me making music again! There are things that I need now (midi in, drum sequencing etc) but this is a 1.0.1 release and it's only going to get better! It's put me back on the creative road again and that's all that matters. Fair play to Apple!⁸

The themes of the discussion follow familiar patterns—high levels of enthusiasm bordering on hyperbole from the Mac user community and *Wired* magazine (Kahney, 2004a), in turn opposed by the expert discourse of music software aficionados. The 'experts' were often vitriolic in their arguments that Garageband, *because* it was so easy to use and relied heavily on dragging and dropping loops,

⁸ This discussion occurred in response to one of my own blog entries about the release of GarageBand: <http://creativitymachine.net/2004/02/09/garageband-usability-vs-hackability/>

rather than requiring the user to compose, or even sample, her own, might cause a ‘flood’ of banal and poorly produced music. Musician Kim Cascone called GarageBand ‘snoozeware for the iPod generation who think that music comes in a small white-and-chrome can and only need be served lukewarm for public consumption’ (quoted in Kahney, 2004a). Some contributions to the debate reproduced the idea that *difficulty* was inherent to any worthwhile aesthetic achievement. For example, in an entry at the popular games culture weblog *Game Girl Advance* Sanford May parodied the GarageBand hype by ‘announcing’ a fake Apple application called ‘Attic Author’:

[...]Apple is proud to announce an add-on package to our popular iLife ‘04 suite of applications — including the easiest to use music playback and purchasing software available, iTunes, and the new, exciting GarageBand music composition software. Today we bring you AtticAuthor.

No more struggling for the right word, the perfect turn of phrase, the most expedient and direct yet elegant metaphor. AtticAuthor takes care of all that for you. With over 1,000 ApplePhrases, and an additional 2,000 available in the optional PenPack, AtticAuthor will have you immediately writing short stories, plays and even novels. Never has creative writing been so easy. [...]

He followed up with a more thoughtful question:

In all seriousness, as skills and techniques that heretofore have taken months, years or even decades to perfect are readily available through

software, will we refocus on and exalt the quality of the underlying content, or will society write off artistic endeavors as mere smoke, mirrors and Macintosh? (May, 2004)

GarageBand was based on the underlying architecture of emagic's Logic Audio software for professional music production which had been recently acquired by Apple, but there are key departures from Logic in the GarageBand user interface that have profound implications for the musical possibilities of the software. Even the most loyal 'amateur' users soon found the limits of the application as they attempted to experiment with musical composition and production beyond 'dragging and dropping' the supplied loops. For example, the earliest versions of GarageBand did not support MIDI out (meaning it was not possible to use external sound modules like drum machines or synthesisers with it), and it did not support Logic's EXS sampler (despite being built on the architecture of the professional music production application Logic and integrating some of Logic's native effects). The application did not afford sound-editing capability beyond cutting the supplied loops (although users could create loops in another program like ACID and import them, or buy loop 'packs' to expand the sonic palette of the GarageBand environment). It was also (and still is) impossible to change tempo mid-song, which significantly limits the user's ability to experiment with musical genres other than rock, pop or dance. Individual users and user communities began searching for and developing workarounds, many of which were later superseded by Apple's integration of the features users had felt were lacking.

There are several online GarageBand user communities where musicians can share their finished tracks, as well as critique, teach, learn and collaborate with other users. The most well-known of these are MacJams.com and iCompositions.com. These online communities provide free space to upload and share their GarageBand compositions with other members and the public, as well as commenting and rating systems, forums, and the integration of Creative Commons (or Creative Commons style) licenses to afford legal remixing and collaboration among users. The practices of these GarageBand communities exceed the dominant construction of the iLife user as an individual who uses the software to ‘express’ himself, and instead extend the idea of creativity to include collaboration, critique, reworking, and remixing one’s own as well as others’ work. However, at the same time as these communities function as a nexus of musical interests, the sharing of knowledge and collaborative creative production, they also generate enthusiasm for new releases of hardware and software microphones, amplifiers, effects pedals, sound cards, loops packs and so on. The good citizens in these communities help and encourage each other to make more interesting, more meaningful, or more polished music, at the same time as they help each other to be better consumers of technology.

6. Conclusions

This chapter has traced the social construction of technologies that are designed for everyday creative practice and marketed to ordinary users. The process of negotiation, stabilisation and reinvention of these technologies can be seen as a dance between usability—where a ‘transparent’ interface provides access to a pre-

given creative task for the least expert users, and hackability—the promise of expansive possibilities for experimentation and innovation.

The example of the mass popularisation of photography by Kodak shows that the segmentation of the market for technologies has profound impacts on the relations of cultural production. That is, the boundary between vernacular photography, professional photography and art photography in modernity was technological as much as it was cultural and economic. The amateur market for photography, in a very real sense, was created by Kodak. Kodak operated as a ‘cultural leader’ for photography, shaping the practice, uses and meanings of popular photography and at the same time opening up spaces for participation that had not existed before; however, the everyday uses of consumer-end photographic technologies exceeded or subverted those meanings. As with the example of the ‘Kodak’ moment, the domestication of personal computing illuminated the ways in which the *uses*, and even the *users* of technologies are configured and reconfigured over time, not only via representation, as in advertising or media coverage, but also via the design of the actual ‘things’ themselves, as with the emergence and subsequent dominance of the Graphical User Interface and the hegemony of usability as a design ethic. The various themes of the chapter converged in a discussion of Apple’s iLife suite of creative media software. The iLife suite represents a convergence of culture and technology that works to construct an ideal ‘creative consumer’, who playfully uses an ever-increasing array of transparently usable digital tools to seamlessly integrate ‘amateur’ cultural production into everyday life.

The next step is to build on this understanding of the socio-technical construction of vernacular creativity and to move beyond the individual ‘consumer’ and his or her machines. Each of the following two chapters investigates the ways in which particular technologies, understood as social and technical assemblages, are articulated to economic, social and institutional contexts, and examines them, not just as the means to individual content creation, but also as sites of social connection and cultural citizenship.

Chapter 4

Case Study: The Flickr Photosharing Network

1. Introduction

At the level of its most basic functionality, Flickr⁹ is simply a ‘photosharing’ service—it is a website to which individual users can upload their personal photographs for others to view. However, as the analysis developed in this chapter will demonstrate, Flickr’s architecture has affordances that go far beyond the publishing and viewing of images, and extend to a number of levels of social and aesthetic engagement.

The participatory turn in web business models that the business and web design communities refer to as ‘Web 2.0’ (O’Reilly, 2005) is characterised by the convergence of social networks, online communities, and ‘consumer-created’ creative content, a convergence which sometimes (especially in the UK) goes by the name ‘social media’. Flickr is one of the first and most well-known examples of this trend towards convergence between online social networks and creative content distribution; it is in fact an emergent and collaborative three-way articulation of social networking with individual content creation and communities of practice. By ‘communities of practice’ I mean the emergent cultures that result from interaction between the members of the more abstract ‘designed’ community—in this case, the

⁹ <http://flickr.com>

Flickr network's architecture and its affordances. The significance of the notion of a 'community or practice' lies in the ways in which the members of the community of practice will almost certainly interpret and exploit these affordances in ways that are not fully anticipated in design (Johnson, 2001: 53).

Industry expert Tom Coates captured the range of emergent cultural practices that co-exist on the network in the following description of Flickr as an example of social media:

On Flickr many people upload photos from their cameras and mobile phones not just to put them on the Internet, but as a form of presence that shows their friends what they're up to and where in the world they are. Their content is a social glue. Meanwhile, other users are busy competing with each other, getting support and advice from other users, or are collecting photos, tagging photos or using them in new creative ways due to the benefits of Creative Commons licenses. (Coates, 2006)

It is clearly more productive to conceptualise Flickr as a social destination and a site of cultural practice than it is to understand it as merely a technological innovation resulting in a photosharing 'service'. Indeed, CEO Stewart Butterfield placed Flickr firmly in the category of social media, at the same time connecting everyday vernacular photography with the networked public sphere, in his recent announcement that Flickr aims to be 'the eyes of the world':

That can manifest itself as art, or using photos as a means of keeping in touch with friends and family, "personal publishing" or intimate, small group sharing. It includes "memory preservation" (the de facto

understanding of what drives the photo industry), but it also includes the ephemera that keeps people related to each other: do you like my new haircut? should I buy these shoes? holy smokes - look what I saw on the way to work! It lets you know who's gone where with whom, what the vacation was like, how much the baby grew today, all as it's happening. And most dramatically, Flickr gives you a window into things that you might otherwise never see, from the perspective of people that you might otherwise never encounter. (Butterfield, 2006)

2. Overview

The Yahoo! Finance website describes Flickr as 'an online digital photo management service that allows users to store, search, sort, and share pictures from digital cameras or camera phones' (Yahoo!, 2006). However, even before examining the uses of Flickr in detail, it should be distinguished from other image hosting services because of its emphasis on sociality. A June 2006 market research study found that, despite its high profile, Flickr ranked sixth among image hosting services. With a market share of only 5.95%, Flickr ranked far below the leading service Photobucket.com, which held 43.84% of market share. These results led several commentators to wonder if the 'blogosphere' and West Coast 'technology evangelists' who consistently frame Flickr as a flagship Web 2.0 platform were out of step with 'the real world' (Kirkpatrick, 2006; Orłowski, 2006). I have no intention of downplaying the co-influence of 'A-list' technology bloggers and Web 2.0 rhetoric in constructing Flickr as a cultural leader in the remediation of personal photography; on the other hand, it is in some ways quite illogical to compare Flickr

with Photobucket in the first place. While both Photobucket and Flickr do allow users to upload and share images, Photobucket is primarily used by bloggers simply to remotely host and serve images to off-site webpages and blogs, while the architecture of Flickr was designed as a ‘community’ built around *internal* image sharing and social interaction from the beginning.

The company that developed Flickr, Ludicorp, is based in Vancouver. The Ludicorp team’s most visible members are the ‘celebrity’ couple Stewart Butterfield (President) and Caterina Fake (Vice Present of Marketing and Community), both of whom were A-list bloggers, and high-profile participants in intellectual web culture and enterprise.¹⁰ It is frequently repeated in media coverage of Flickr that the enterprise owes much of its success to the viral marketing opportunities afforded by the developers’ existing status as leading participants in intellectual web culture, and that Flickr’s uptake in the blogging community was seeded by the community—drawn from the same social circles and extended networks (especially the ‘tech bloggers’)—that had begun to evolve around the company’s earlier project *Game Neverending* while it was in development.

While partly supported by Google text advertising revenue, Flickr’s business model rests on the assumption, not only that the content that gives the network its value is provided by the participants, but also that the participants are willing to pay to

¹⁰ For further evidence of the couple’s ‘celebrity’ status see feature articles in the Time series ‘Time 100: People Who Shape Our World’ (Quittner, 2006), Business Week Online’s ‘Best Leaders: Entrepreneurs’ list (Best Leaders: Entrepreneurs, 2005) and CNN Money’s ‘50 People Who Matter’ (Business 2.0: 50 People Who Matter, 2006)

provide this content. Subscriptions pay for more functionality and an advertising-free experience; 'free' accounts are supported by advertising and have less bandwidth and storage space allocated to them. There was a certain amount of anxiety observable in the Flickr user community over the company's acquisition by Yahoo!. But, in keeping with the emergent business culture of Web 2.0, where there is a convergence, rather than a conflict, between enterprise and 'communitarian' or libertarian ethics, Flickr never pretended to be anything other than the beta version of a commercial enterprise, balancing 'community' and commercial rhetoric from the beginning. The libertarianism that might have been seen as countercultural in the 1990s is now simply good business practice. For example, Flickr has an open Application Programming Interface (API), making the 'back-end' of the database accessible to developers, and resulting in a proliferation of third-party applications, often developed by Flickr enthusiasts and made freely available to other users.¹¹ This balancing act between openness and control also extends to the governance of users. Through the explicit mechanisms of its policy agreements and the implicit mechanism of its database architecture and interaction design, Flickr engages in 'soft control' of its users to maintain a 'non-commercial, personal' culture. In 2006 there was some contestation of the parameters of this culture, when user controversy arose after Flickr enforced its policy against the dominance of non-photographic images (which, it seems, pertains not to drawings but does pertain to screenshots capture in proprietary game environments). Several users had been posting screenshots of

¹¹ The Flickr API is available for non-commercial use by outside developers without the need to obtain any special permission. Commercial use is possible 'by prior arrangement'.

tableaux or stills from in-game movie productions from the popular simulation game SecondLife; Flickr responded by adding metadata to these images so that they would no longer appear in search results—effectively removing the images from public view (Craig, 2006).

Prior to the launch of Flickr and its subsequent sale to Yahoo, Ludicorp's major enterprise was a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) called Game Neverending that was in development from 2002 until it was cancelled in 2004. Preshadowing some of the principal features of Linden Labs' enormously successful virtual world Second Life, Game Neverending (GNE) was primarily a virtual space that afforded open-ended forms of social interaction and object manipulation (including location and object creation and object sharing or trading). Rather than being based on intrinsic goals, rules or conflict, in Game Neverending there was no intrinsic way to 'win' or even to quantify success. A sense of community and communication between players was encouraged through gamewide and location-specific chat channels, as well as the ability to leave 'notes' for other players at any location. It was the object-sharing, extensible architecture and live chat tools built for GNE that were later re-purposed by the developers, eventually becoming the basis of Flickr.¹² Because of this, at the most basic level, the sharing of personal photographic images as the basis of *social interaction* is explicitly written into the architecture of the service. New Flickr users are assigned a profile page, to which they upload images individually or in batches. The uploaded images can be

¹² This evolution is reflected in the continued use of .gne (short for Game NeverEnding) as the extension in Flickr page addresses.

given titles and descriptions, and can be organised into ‘sets’, which work like albums, within their own photostreams. However, the image search functionality that makes Flickr such a popular resource for both users and visitors relies, not on a system of categories (a taxonomy), but an ecology of keywords, or ‘tags’—a ‘folksonomy’. This means that users are able to assign any number of chosen keywords to images, and other users are able to search for images based on these tags. This integration of a user-led freeform tagging system, or ‘folksonomy’ was one of the innovations that made Flickr a ‘poster child’ for Web 2.0 (Marlow et al., 2006; Mathes, 2004). One of the more prominent features of the website is ‘most popular tags’ cloud. There is a pattern to the most popular tags that is characterised by the convergence of the most predictable subjects of vernacular photography—places, family, birthdays, weddings—with the categories of capital ‘P’ photography—technology (canon, film, ‘black & white’) and genre (art, portrait).

All time most popular tags

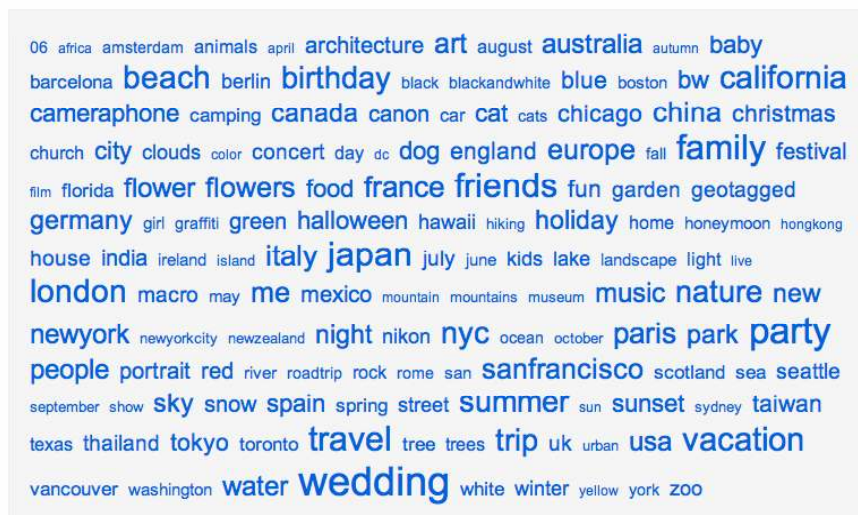


Figure 3: Flickr—All time most popular tags.

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Flickr also aggregates tags so that if a user or visitor searches for an ambiguous keyword, the results page offers a 'cluster' of semantically proximate images.

'Interestingness' is Flickr's way of filtering the millions of images on the network based not only on quantitative popularity (number of views) but also social interest (the amount of discussion generated by the image). The algorithm that Flickr uses to calculate interestingness has not been revealed, in an attempt to reduce gaming and to preserve the integrity of its intended purpose, but it is based on some combination of the number of views an image has received, the number of comments that have been made about it, and the number of times it has been 'favourited' by other users, adjusted to take into account the social 'distance' within the Flickr network between the photographer and the users who have 'favourited' or commented on the image. The images that score the highest levels of 'interestingness' are promoted each day in the 'explore' pages. At the Explore page users are able to access showcased images, the 'most popular' tags cloud, as well as the chronological 'interestingness' archive. The Explore page is the only centralised 'portal' from which users and visitors are invited to view the network from any point other than their own profile and the social connections that proliferate from it.

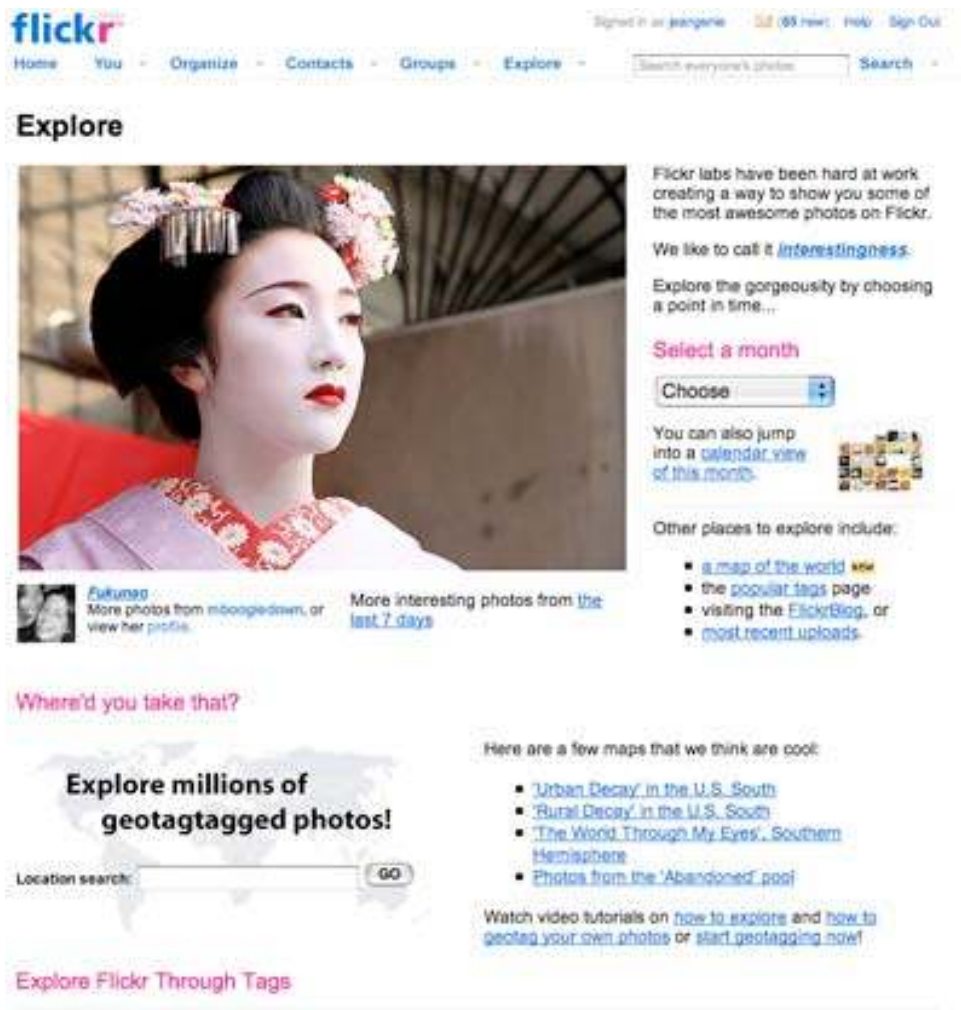


Figure 4: Flickr—Explore page.

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3. Participation as Play

To revisit and extend the terminology of the previous chapter, in analysing the modes of participation that Flickr affords, I propose *playability* as an ideal alternative to the (equally idealised) extremes of hackability and usability. This chapter will demonstrate the ways in which Flickr is an example of this balance between: an accessible interface and the explicit invitation to multiple levels of engagement, technical and aesthetic ‘mastery’. In addition, participation in Flickr

affords a less purely technological and more explicitly cultural sense of ‘play’—the ability to create, negotiate and encounter cultural richness and diversity. It is in fact possible to view Flickr as an open and configurable, but at the same time deeply structured, game environment where a variety of forms of ‘massively multiplayer online’ play are integrated periodically into the everyday lives and ‘offline’ social networks of individual participants. It is not insignificant that the company behind Flickr is called Ludicorp—these characteristics of participation are in various ways designed into the network; indeed, their early slogan while developing *Game Neverending* was ‘groupware for play’.

It is, unsurprisingly, game studies that contributes most usefully to this concept of play as an analytical tool for questions of structure and agency in new media contexts. Game studies approaches to play, in turn, almost always explicitly draw on the foundational theories of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois. Huizinga (1950: 13) defines play as:

A free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.

Before proceeding to the formal classification of games which is the main purpose of his book, Caillois (1961: 9-10) similarly listed the defining characteristics of play as:

1. *Free*: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;
2. *Separate*: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
3. *Uncertain*: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative;
4. *Unproductive*: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
5. *Governed by rules*: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;
6. *Make-believe*: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life.

Drawing on and critiquing the foundational work of Huizinga (1950) and William Stephenson (1967) on play and Caillois's (1961) critical transposition of Huizinga, since the advent of the World Wide Web 'play' has frequently figured in cultural and media studies work as a more general characteristic of participation in new media

contexts. According to this view, one of the most important ‘affordances’ of new media is to provide a ‘play-space’ for the ‘reader’ – a space that is characterised by multiple possible entry points, multiple levels of engagement, and flexible combinations of genre codes. Thus, new media is understood by many as even more ‘playable’ than any preceding form (Silverstone, 1999), a notion that has been extended beyond notions of reactive ‘interactivity’ to much more active and participatory concepts such as Tim Berners-Lee’s ‘intercreativity’ (Berners-Lee, 1999: 12). Building on this work, and in particular taking up Julian Kücklich’s (2004) argument that ‘play and playability’ should be ‘key concepts’ in new media studies I use the term ‘play’ deliberately and quite specifically as a conceptual framework for the material negotiation of the structure-agency problem in the context of Flickr. Although in English ‘play’ is a productively multivalent term, with Frasca (1999) I argue that in speaking about game environments it is important not only to distinguish between ‘play’ and the narrower concept of ‘game’, but also to distinguish between two forms of play: ludus and paidia. Caillois (1961) proposed ‘paidea’ as an equivalent to the English noun ‘play’, and ‘ludus’ for the noun ‘game’:

[Games] can also be placed on a continuum between two opposite poles. At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrollable fantasy that can be designated by the term paidia. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complimentary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic

and capricious nature... I call this second component ludus (Caillois, 1961: 27).

Frasca combines Caillois and Lalande (1928) to apply this distinction to computer game play. Thus *paidia* is ‘prodigality of physical or mental activity which has no immediate useful objective, nor defined objective, and whose only reason to be is based in the pleasure experimented by the player’, while *ludus* is an ‘activity organized under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss.’ Most computer games, at least at the most obvious level, are a specific, structured form of play (*ludus*) that has a clear and final result: they define a winner and a loser; while not all play, even within game environments, is ‘ludic’ in precisely this way, instead being characterised by more free-form practices.

It is useful to reformulate Caillois’ opposing concepts—*paidia* as unstructured ‘free play’ and *ludus* as ‘the taste for gratuitous difficulty’ (Caillois, 1961: 27), so that they are viewed not as mutually exclusive categories but as complementary dynamics of play. Indeed, ‘free play’ has more rules, not less, than formal games, but the rules are often hidden or implied and need to be discovered through the play process, as in when children play ‘at’ being ‘cops and robbers’. There are two additional aspects of the classic definitions of play that do not hold true for Flickr, or indeed for most contemporary computer games. First, both Huizinga (1950) and Caillois (1961), followed by Silverstone (1999) maintain that play is an exceptional, special activity that is separate from ordinary reality. Second, play, because of its separation from the ‘real world’, is held to be unproductive of anything that can be used or valued outside of the space of play. But in the case of Flickr this is clearly

not the case—new images and aesthetic forms are produced as a routine consequence of participation in the Flickr network; and even in computer game studies the idea of play being necessarily unproductive is increasingly being questioned (Pearce, 2006). The idea of play as participation is appropriate for understanding Web 2.0 content creation platforms and social software (Community Sites as Games, 2006), and, in this case Flickr, on the basis that participation in these environments, as in games, can be viewed as a form of productive play that rewards both creativity and social interaction.

At the most basic level, each action of uploading an image contains a potential reward—there is always the possibility that someone will view and enjoy it; the reward is delivered in material form if another user leaves a comment or marks the image as a favourite. The comments that other users may leave on an image can be simply affirming ('wow!') or critical ('I like the composition, but maybe it's a bit dark?') or designed to promote connection and exchange ('I took a photo of the same bridge!'). If another user particularly enjoys an image, they may 'favourite' it, adding to its 'interestingness' and potentially drawing more users to view it. If a user is particularly interested in another user's images, or has some social basis for connection (e.g. living in the same part of the world), they may add the other user as a contact, creating stronger ties and a greater likelihood of further contact between the two users. As with games, users gain more rewards the more they explore the environment to find new modes of participation – joining groups, participating in group discussions, undertaking photographic 'challenges' developed within groups (as in, for example, the many groups who organise photographic 'treasure hunts'), or attending offline meetups. At a fairly basic level, then, the Flickr network is an

‘architecture of participation’ that functions somewhat like a game, promoting exploratory and playful forms of engagement. However, this does not mean that all the participants in the Flickr network are playing the same game. The next section of this chapter will investigate in concrete detail some of Flickr’s most active users, and the ways in which they participate in the network.

4. Users and Uses

Background

The following table is a demographic summary of the seven Brisbane-based Flickr users with whom I chose to undertake extended field interviews for this project, following on from two and a half years of ‘online’ participant observation and attendance at offline ‘meetups’.

Table 1: Flickr Users Interviewed

<i>Name</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
Cyron	M	30	Suburban	Tertiary (incomplete)	Online customer support
David	M	32	Semi-rural	Tertiary (incomplete)	IT network security
Louise	F	44	Suburban	Tertiary (Bachelors Degree)	Nursing, medical research
Melanie	F	47	Outer suburban	Secondary (incomplete)	Web design (self-employed)
Mr Magoo ICU	M	26	Suburban	Secondary (incomplete)	Computer systems engineer
Shanrosen	F	55	Suburban	Tertiary (Bachelors Degree)	Part-time student
Yinyang	M	39	Suburban	Tertiary (incomplete)	IT contractor

The participants were selected both because they were highly visible and locally accessible. Because of the limitation of my selection to local members and also because I selected them on the basis of their visibility, which is a direct result of their active participation in groups, the participants I interviewed are not necessarily ‘ordinary’ users; rather, these seven participants represent a particular kind of especially ‘active’ user. It is also interesting that they were the first seven I approached for interview, and they all quickly agreed to participate, suggesting that they see themselves as enthusiastic or particularly ‘community-minded’ participants, and are interested in participating in the public discourse around Flickr. However,

neither are these seven participants necessarily representative of the most ‘popular’ members of Flickr in terms of receiving a large number of visitors to their photo streams, having the most ‘interesting’ images, or of having a large number of people add them to their contacts lists. Elsewhere on Flickr, however, there is by now a reasonably coherent segment of the community with ‘celebrity’ status; a status that is not only derived from their ‘good’ images but also from the standing of their social networks (and their social proximity to the developers), as well as their leadership roles in Flickr and the blogosphere.

Interview Snapshots

Cyron¹³ is 30 years old and works for an online casino in customer support. Cyron did well at high school but wasn’t able to make the transition to university study successfully, although he completed several semesters and a TAFE course before taking up his current position. As a child he had ‘one of the first PC clones’ and taught himself some BASIC through ‘write your own games’ articles in computer magazines, and later got into online MUDs as an online extension of his interest in offline role-playing games. He maintained a LiveJournal and then a weblog for a few years before joining Flickr, and has been a moderator on the Whirlpool forums¹⁴ since 2000. His interest in photography developed alongside his participation in

¹³ Real name and Flickr username. See <http://flickr.com/people/cyron/>

¹⁴ Whirlpool was originally devoted to broadband news and information, but is now one of Australia’s largest general technology-related online communities. See <http://whirlpool.net.au>.

Flickr. We conduct the interview on a Saturday morning, sitting under a tree adjacent to the West End Markets, where we were both attending a Brisbane Flickr meetup.



Figure 5: ‘Green is Beautiful’ by Cyron¹⁵

David de Groot¹⁶ is 32 years old, and has a strong background in IT. He taught himself BASIC (and later C+) on an Amstrad personal computer as a child in the 1980s, studied information technology at university, and has worked in IT ever since, mostly in network administration. He currently works in network security at a major office complex in the city. A few months ago, after 3 years planning and building the house, David moved with his family to Cedar Creek—a semi-rural area about 20 minutes drive from Brisbane’s northwestern fringe. We conduct the interview in an area between the dining room and lounge where there are at least 5 computers permanently connected to ADSL broadband, and where they have set up

¹⁵ This image is published under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 license. The license can be viewed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>.

¹⁶ Real name and Flickr username. See: <http://flickr.com/people/dadegroot/>

both a home network and a web server on which David hosts his own blogs and web photo gallery.



Figure 6: David de Groot's computer room (courtesy David de Groot)

David and his partner Lea tell me that they and their three young children spend much of their time as a family in this space, gaming, working, or surfing the Internet—in effect, this space is their family room, and the layout of the house was designed expressly for that purpose. Throughout the interview, Lea (who runs a web development business from home) works on her Powerbook, periodically switching from her work to take part in the conversation, while their daughter plays World of Warcraft on another PC. When I ask if they have a TV anywhere, Lea indicates the corner of the lounge room and laughingly replies, “Yeah, I think the kids watched a DVD on it earlier”.



Figure 7: 'Shell on the Beach' by David de Groot

Louise¹⁷ is 44 years old, and works in the nursing profession at a major Brisbane hospital. She originally worked as a registered nurse, and then stayed home with the children for about six years. Following that, Louise returned to full-time study at university to upgrade her qualifications to degree level, and because of the demands of study learned to use a computer for word processing, email and the Internet at this time. She has recently moved into a research management role after several years working in Oncology and ongoing study in related areas. We conduct the interview in the outer suburban home that she shares with her husband (a self-employed tradesperson) and three school-age children. The PC is located in a separate study, and is connected to the Internet via broadband (also connected to a wireless router). On the desk is a video iPod and Louise's Nikon D50, a fully featured digital SLR. On the day of the interview, the family is preparing to leave for a skiing holiday.

¹⁷ Real name. See: <http://flickr.com/people/90222457@N00/>



Figure 8: 'Duck and Zoingo Boingo together' by Louise

Melanie Cook¹⁸ is 47 years old, and has been self-educated, apart from a few short courses, since the age of fifteen. She considers herself to have always been an early adopter of technology, learned computing gradually as the insurance industry became computerised, and as she became more involved in Internet role-playing communities and online social networks. We conduct the interview at Melanie's home in the outer Eastern suburbs of Brisbane. The house is decorated with Melanie's hand-made mobiles, wind chimes, and artworks, and the bookshelf is full of science fiction and fantasy books and videos. We begin the interview at the kitchen table and then move to the family computer nook, where there are two computers connected to various peripherals, including a webcam and a broadband connection. Later in my visit Melanie shows me her workroom, which is packed

¹⁸ Real name. See: <http://flickr.com/people/wiccked/>

with craft supplies that she uses to make jewellery and paper-based craft objects. She has an online store where she sells her jewellery, craft objects and hand-made tarot cards, and runs a web design business with her daughter: her business card describes her as a 'multimedia artist and website junkie'. She also has a personal weblog and keeps a paper journal.



Figure 9: 'When I Look' by Melanie Cook

Mr Magoo ICU¹⁹ is 26 years old, and is currently a Senior Systems Engineer working for a company that manages the computer system and network for a power station. He completed Year 10 but never finished year 12 and hasn't attended university or technical college. He acquired basic computer literacy as a normal part of the high school curriculum in the 1990s, and enjoyed experimenting with the hardware and software aspects of computing from his teens onward, including being part of the hacker community and writing his own games, effectively teaching himself the skills that he now uses in his job. In addition his uncle, who was a

¹⁹ Flickr username. See: http://flickr.com/people/mr_magoo_icu/

programmer, introduced him to programming and graphics, and in the early days of the web he was a member of various bulletin boards, either local or interest-based (warez, hacking, and so on). In an email exchange prior to our interview, he listed his hobbies as computers, cars, photography, drawing and cooking. We conduct the interview in the dining room of his townhouse in the Eastern suburbs of Brisbane. Around the walls are several Dali prints as well as large canvas prints of urban exploration photographs taken in drains, abandoned tunnels and other sites of underground urban decay around Brisbane, some of which are his own, and were recently featured in an exhibition in Fortitude Valley, as well as some by his friend and fellow urban explorer dsankt, from the well-known urban exploration photography website *Sleepy City*.



Figure 10: ‘Gatecrashed Drain’ by Mr Magoo ICU²⁰

Shanrosen²¹ is 55 years old and is currently enrolled in a Graduate Diploma in Internet Studies, focusing on “policy and practices”. After high school she studied fine arts at East Sydney Tech for two years before working in a range of jobs, and later returning to study to do a medical degree at the University of Queensland and working as a general practitioner for twenty years. During this time she was very involved in folk music, including being an active participant in the Maleny Folk Federation, playing and collecting various ‘world music’ wind and percussion instruments. She is currently on a pension due to a chronic medical disability, and spends much of her time in her study at her home in Brisbane’s inner western

²⁰ This image is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 2.0 license. The license can be viewed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/>

²¹ Flickr username. See: <http://flickr.com/people/pamrosengren/>

suburbs, which she shares with her son, and this is also where we conduct the interview. In regard to her illness, she says “I’m philosophical about it, because on the one hand I haven’t got a lot of money, but on the other hand I’ve got my time and my thoughts, which a lot of working people just don’t have.”



Figure 11: ‘Once was a Window’ by Shanrosen²²

Yinyang²³ is a 39-year-old IT contractor who migrated to Australia several years ago from the UK. He currently lives in the Eastern suburbs of Brisbane, about 15 minutes drive from the city centre. Following secondary school he worked in the fashion retail industry, advancing from working on the shop floor to working in various aspects of IT. At one stage, he attended post-secondary college, studying Business. At his request, our interview is conducted at one of several new bistro/cafes in James Street, New Farm, which is a highly gentrified entertainment and lifestyle retail precinct in the inner city area of Brisbane. Our conversation is

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²³ Flickr username. See: <http://flickr.com/people/albertyinyang/>

punctuated by the jazz, funk and electronica that the cafe plays at full volume, and yinyang drinks two espressos as we talk. I had requested we do the interview somewhere with Internet access, so he has brought his Apple Powerbook and we browse the Flickr website from our position at the high bar facing the street. Yinyang's early experience with computers was gained at work —as the fashion retail industry was gradually computerised, his skills and knowledge developed along with it. He is one of the forum administrators of iLounge, has been actively involved in both the Whirlpool and AppleTalk Australia forums, and has maintained a personal weblog irregularly since 2004. His first personal computer was a 'lampshade' iMac, which he bought in 2001 after a careful research and decision-making process, influenced mainly, he says, not only by the functionality and ease of maintenance of the OS X operating system in comparison to Windows, but also the aesthetics of the object itself.



Figure 12: 'Straightened Perspective' by Yinyang²⁴

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5. Technologies and Literacies

Computer Use and Internet Participation

All of the seven participants had been active in online communities of some kind prior to their involvement with Flickr, and most of them had built up extensive computing expertise over several decades. Some—David, Cyron and Mr Magoo ICU—had taught themselves computer programming as children (in some cases with the aid of computer magazines, friends or family members). Cyron’s description of how he became involved with computers as a child is a good illustration of how vernacular literacy works, as discussed in the previous chapter. That is, even though the definition of literacy has been largely captured by the discourses of formal education and occupational training, the acquisition of the actual competencies that combine to make up ‘computer literacy’ are inseparable in practice from everyday play and engagement with popular culture. Cyron explains:

Computers have always been an interest area of mine since I was a very young teenager, maybe even younger. My grandmother bought my brother and me one of the first PC clones, back in the days of Commodore 64s and Amiga 500s before Windows. My grandmother said ‘here, this is educational’ and we ended up with a computer.

Interviewer: So what did you do with it?

Cyron: Played games. Of course. [laughs] No, but I also taught myself a bit of BASIC programming.

Interviewer: What did you do with that?

Cyron: At the time there were a lot of write-your-own games in BASIC.

You'd buy a computer magazine and it would have a code by code breakdown of games and I'd write that, and also in an attempt to be creative I got some of the music notation from music class and I'd make that beep out of my PC speaker [laughs]. So I taught myself the basics of that, and it was just a passion that caught on. [...]

In terms of Internet participation, Cyron's description of his orientation to online communities references the idea that 'hard' access (to a computer and an Internet connection) has to be articulated to personal interests in order for ongoing engagement to occur. He said that, because he no longer had a personal computer at home, and because Internet access was not widespread in the mid-1990s, it wasn't until he moved to Brisbane to attend university in 1995 that he 'got onto the Internet for the first time and got back into computers again', gaining dial-up access to the Internet via his university account. He was able to build on a pre-existing interest in (paper-based) role playing games to 'get into' online MUDs.²⁵ As the World Wide Web developed into a mainstream media space, Cyron says, he became 'more of a surfer', and since then he has been able to find ways to articulate his various and changing offline and online interests with various online communities. Since 2000, for example, he has been very involved with Whirlpool as a moderator, which he says had been his 'latest passion'.

²⁵ MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons, Domains or Dimensions) are multi-player computer games, or 'virtual worlds' built largely around the text-based interactions of participants, that combine the features of Role Playing Games (RPGs) with chat rooms.

Others learned to use computers as part of their work or study, only later finding leisure- or interest-based uses for their online participation. From the early days of her working life, Melanie was always the first to volunteer at work to learn a new computer system or software application, but after buying a home computer and Internet access, she became very involved in online role-playing games and social networks; likewise, Yinyang began his working life with no knowledge of computers, but his computer expertise grew as the retail industry's reliance on IT grew. Louise had enthusiastically played Nintendo with her son when he was a young child but only learned to use a computer when she returned to University study in her thirties, and after 'stumbling across' a personal blog that she found engaging and striking up a friendship with the author, she has been mentored by him to join Flickr and participate more in the social and creative spaces of the Internet.

In 1995 Shanrosen was advised by an education professional to buy her son a computer to support his learning needs. Having never used a computer and without knowing much about them, but not wanting to be 'robbed' by computer salespeople, she began reading magazines to research her purchase and to learn about personal computers, eventually buying an Apple Macintosh which she loaded with graphics applications in the hope of providing her son with alternative career options in a creative field. But she soon developed her own interests in the creative uses of the technology:

Shanrosen: I started playing with the toys too...straight away, I couldn't resist. After I saw what he was doing I got computer graphics magazines, design graphics, stuff like that, and I thought I might be a

web designer after that because I took to that.

Building on her interests in computer graphics and web design, Shanrosen did a lot of ‘lurking’ on technology, Internet policy, and design-related discussion lists from the late 1990s onward, later on becoming an active participant.

Most of the participants described the beginning of their involvement with Flickr as a process of accidental discovery and exploration. For example, Cyron told me that he ‘stumbled across’ Flickr via the images at the BrisVegas Bloggers group weblog, and began to explore the network because, he said, he was interested to see what photos people were taking of Brisbane. Yinyang had heard about Flickr ‘around the web’, and initially signed up in order to share photographs with his extended family overseas. Louise was introduced to Flickr by her online friend who was gradually teaching her about computers and the Internet, and who suggested that she join Flickr ‘so he could see what her life was like’.

Louise: He said, “Look at my Flickr pages, you can see from five or six years ago through to now!” Like, you can see what I did on the weekend by my Flickr page. And so that was a real insight.

Before joining Flickr, Melanie had been maintaining a photoblog of her own for a year or two, but said that she was attracted to Flickr because of the ease of use and functionality of its architecture. David also had his own photoblog, but had ‘heard about’ Flickr ‘around the web’ and so thought he’d ‘have a look’ at it. Shanrosen had ‘heard about’ Flickr and had been ‘lurking’ for some time before signing up herself:

I started going there just because it used to make me so happy to see all

these photos people were doing. I mean some of them are just really beautiful, some of them are really funny, and I just used to like seeing the whole world.

She had also completed a university assignment on Flickr as an online community, but wasn't signed up as a member, thinking she would wait until she was able to buy a 'good' digital camera:

But during the case study I got shamed into it because I was seeing these different people with absolute garbage cameras way worse than mine, doing beautiful photography. And I thought, well, what am I on about, if they're doing that, there's all kinds of people with all kinds of garbage cameras and they're not worried about it.

Learning Photography, Consuming Technology

Flickr, as a space for the practice of vernacular creativity, can be usefully situated within the broader context of consumer culture and technological change. The participants' narratives of 'becoming photographers' reveal complex relationships among the knowledgeable consumption of technologies, learning the techniques and aesthetics of 'good' photography, and participating in communities of practice, both online and off. As part of their self-development and 'autonomous' learning of photography, active Flickr participants are also becoming increasingly willing consumers of digital cameras, lenses, software and computers to support their creative practice. Even those participants who resist the obsolescence-and-upgrade cycle of digital technology, opting instead for 'analogue' photographic technologies

like medium format film cameras; do so *in relation* to the technological hegemony that structures contemporary photography.

Shanrosen had a Pentax camera which she used for photography classes in art school in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and did a lot of photography, particularly when her son was growing up. After a hiatus she acquired an Olympus Camedia,²⁶ about which she laughingly says, “It’s got 1.4 Megapixels, it’s like a mobile phone with a proper lens, only it hasn’t got the phone. It was the first digital camera to get through the one megapixel barrier.” Because of her interest in *art* and her ‘primitive’ equipment, Shanrosen has developed an interest in unusual subjects and approaches to photography, rather than technique.

Cyron told me that he came across Flickr more or less accidentally, coinciding with a nascent interest in photography:

Interviewer: You hadn’t really been into photography that much before?

Cyron: No, I’d never picked up a film SLR in my life, never held one, never touched one. And you could probably count the number of photos I’ve taken even with the old film point and shoots on a couple of hands. Never been a huge part of my life and it was never something that particularly appealed to me, never had any meaning for me I guess. It was nice to have a look at the photo at the end, but you know, you get the photos printed out and you go “hey, look at that” and then they get

²⁶ The Olympus Camedia was a very early digital camera, released in approximately 1998.

put away.

In the next part of our conversation, Cyron explains how the ownership of a new digital camera combined with his growing awareness of the cultural power and relevance of Flickr to his own life:

Interviewer: So what's the difference now?

Cyron: [...] I think it's probably not so much the difference between digital and film as something that happened in my own mind. But I got this digital camera, and I was excited about it, and I guess also it was really my very first camera. [...] I really started to get excited about the camera and I guess the ability to see immediate results made a huge difference.

And it was just the right time, because then there was this Flickr group. I had seen Flickr before...when the Australian embassy in Indonesia was bombed. I remember seeing Flickr at that point and seeing a photo [of the bombing] before it had even hit the news. [...] But then a post about the Brisbane group on Flickr [was published on a weblog] and I thought that was really interesting—the chance to go and actually see other people's photos from around Brisbane. So I joined up there.

For the next few months Cyron participated in an increasingly active way, focusing especially on the Brisbanites group, and beginning to teach himself 'everything he could' about 'the theory' of photography.

Interviewer: How did you do that?

Cyron: All through Google, and Wikipedia, and I did actually buy myself a beginner's guide to digital photography. It was a fantastic book that explained all about the different things you could do, like bracketing. I'd never heard of the phrase before. It was the first time I really understood how to correlate the aperture and the focal length and the ISO speed and how they all interlink to get a decent exposure. I started to feel confident to experiment because I actually knew *how* to experiment. I started to think 'well, I actually know what I can do now, so let's try something different' as opposed to saying 'I'm just going to leave this on auto'.

A year later, he 'upgraded' to a Digital SLR, and it has been 'almost constantly by [his] side ever since.' Cyron now attends offline meetups regularly, and has contributed to hundreds of groups on the Flickr network. His experience of making the transition from being a peripheral, to a highly active, participant, and his self-education in 'advanced' photography is bound up with his increased consumption of more 'sophisticated' digital technologies. David's description of how he began to explore more advanced photographic techniques was framed more directly as a result of the affordances of new technologies:

When I first started out and I was playing with the SLR a mate of mine and I would go to motorsport events and we'd just try to catch cool photos of cars. So it was just, ooh, that looks like it's going to crash, let's take a photo! But once the digital [cameras] came out—it was still very documentary, and I still do a lot of documentary photos—I was

here, this is what I saw, you know, that's really cool. But since I got this one [the new digital camera] it's just opened up the possibilities, you know, the little macro shots or bigger panoramas or whatever. It's a lot more flexible, and as I've developed I've thought more about what I'm taking, rather than just "Ooh, look at that, snap snap snap".

In a recurring pattern, the participants' discourse around photographic practice correlated to their generally proactive and creative attitudes towards computer use and internet participation. Like their recollections of 'learning computers', their stories about learning photography were characterised by stories of playful and ongoing exploration, experimentation and discovery, articulated to ongoing technological knowledge and consumption. The way Yinyang narrated the story of his gradual development from a very casual user into an extremely active photographer and member of Flickr is quite typical of this pattern, and because of its comprehensiveness and coherence, it is worth reproducing in full. When asked to reflect on how he first came to sign up at Flickr, Yinyang said:

I don't know, I can't remember. I think I would have gone [to a website] somewhere, and some photo, I don't know, someone had shared some photos, and you know how you click on it and you end up at the Flickr site and think "Oh, what's this? 'Photosharing', that's a really good idea!" And I think at the time because my ex-wife's family are all spread out all over the place, my family are spread out all over the place, everyone's got kids, everyone's like "How are the kids, why haven't you sent me any photos..." and all this kind of stuff—3 years ago everyone

was still using dial-up, so trying to send a photo, you have to compress it down...

Interviewer: So it was literally a practical solution to how to share photos with family and friends?

Yinyang: Yeah, the Flickr thing started that way. In November 2004, I went back to London for my Mum's birthday, and just before I went I thought it would be nice to take some photos. Up until then I didn't have a digital camera. So I bought a little point'n'shoot. From there it kind of progressed.

I took more and more photos, more of the kids, the in-laws and stuff like that, and the free Flickr account has a restriction, I think you only get three sets. And I was trying to organise sets for my family, and there were six families...so then I got a Pro account. And I suppose once you get a Pro account you think, "Well, I've got so much bandwidth, what am I going to do with it all?"

And I was taking more and more photos, I was finding that the little point and shoot wasn't as capable, you know, low light conditions, fast action shots and all this kind of stuff. So I started to want to do...as opposed to just point and shoot and, you know, recording whatever happens, I started getting a bit—not to sound really wanky—but I started to get arty about it.

Interviewer: Is that just because you were taking so many photos and started to get more discerning about your own stuff, or is it also partly because of seeing so many other great photos in the network?

Yinyang: I suppose it started off as just wanting to improve my own, but then as you explore Flickr, you find out: “Oh, that’s a really nice shot, I wonder how they did that?” And then it just gets the whole wheel turning and so in March 2006 I got a DSLR.²⁷ And then it went downhill from there! [laughs]

As with the purchase of a Pro Account, where an initial focus on the external social utility of Flickr was transformed into an engagement with its intrinsic possibilities, Yinyang’s investment in expensive and more powerful technology led him to explore ways of improving and expanding his creative practice. He told me that the transition from a fully automatic ‘point and shoot’ camera to a Digital SLR (DSLR) presented a challenge, because even though he tried to ‘vaguely’ read about the settings that were required to operate his new camera in manual mode, it seemed to be ‘far too difficult’. Eventually, however, he signed up for a photography course, opening up the technical possibilities further, and leading to more purchases of photographic technology:

Yinyang: I’m currently doing a short course at the Brisbane College of

²⁷ A DSLR is a digital single-lens reflex camera which, like a film SLR, allows for interchangeable lenses and full manual control of exposure settings, and therefore is considered to be a ‘professional’ camera and is far more expensive than the ‘point and shoot’ digital cameras sold to the ‘consumer’ market.

Photography and Art, one of those 8 week courses. [...] So from there it's just—I've spent money on lenses—and just like with every other tech thing you get camera envy, lens envy, gadget envy...I think [since buying the DSLR] I've taken close to 5000 shots.

Yinyang's experience contrasts with that of Mr Magoo ICU, who was in the minority of participants I interviewed in that he had been keenly interested in photography already, before becoming involved in Flickr. However the way his consumption and creative practice are articulated follows the same pattern as Cyrons, Yinyang's and David's, describing a symbiotic relationship between the evolution of a more refined aesthetic sensibility, more advanced technical proficiency, and the acquisition of 'better' photographic equipment:

Mr Magoo ICU: It was probably from the age of about 18 or so, I borrowed a friend's film SLR, probably only for about a 3 month period or so, but I started taking photos, learning the basics, and got right into the technical side of it, trying to learn how to use all the manual settings. I didn't want to just put it on auto and take photos, I wanted to, you know, I'd see a photo in a magazine or something and I'd want to know how they took it, and I'd start trying to research into that aspect of it. Mostly through the Internet, because you can find just about anything on there. So I just started researching various aspects of photography and worked out what I wanted, using just stereotypical animal shots, flora and fauna, that sort of thing. Landscape shots as well. Back then it was just fairly basic sort of stuff, I did maybe half a dozen rolls of film, then

[the friend who owned the camera] went back overseas and I gave him back his camera. I'd say I was about 22 when I got my first digital camera, It was a 3.2 megapixel point-and-shoot. It started out from there. I started out with the very basic sort of shots that most people do, they go on a trip somewhere and just take photos of everything, nothing that sort of stands out. I just worked from there to find particular areas of photography that I enjoyed. A lot of it was just flowers, you know, bugs on a flower and very cliched type shots. I guess that sort of carried on for a while. I started doing some sunset and sunrise photos as well, which got me more into once again the technical side of trying to use the manual settings on my camera which you just couldn't do on that one. So a couple of years back I bought my first digital SLR and sort of took off from there.

Interviewer: And did having that camera change the sorts of photos you took?

Mr Magoo ICU: It did because I realised the limitations of the camera that I had at the time was what was holding me back. Just my knowledge and the sort of photos I wanted to take got to a point where I thought, if I had a manual SLR I could take this shot right here but I know it's not going to turn out on my camera, but being able to have zoom lenses and all that sort of thing which you just kind of do with those sort of cameras made a big difference. It came to a certain point where I thought, I had the money to spend on that kind of basic setup initially, which is kind of the same price as my automatic digicam a few years back because

everything had come down in price, so I thought the time was right to get something and it was still a strong interest of mine, so that's what got me into it on the SLR side of it, which does open up a lot of different avenues for you as well, different types of photography that you can do. Night-time work as well, which is what I got into in a fairly big way.

His comments also illustrate the way that the *sociality* of Flickr is at least as important as its convenience for content 'distribution':

Mr Magoo ICU: I knew nothing about Flickr until a friend of mine at work got me onto it. He was into photography as well and we'd gone out a few times to the city to take photos, just of buildings and stuff like that. And he was telling me about it and showed me the website, and I thought it was a pretty good setup, the way that people commented on photos was a good way of getting feedback. [...] And a way of improving my photography as well, learning from other people.

Louise had only been participating in Flickr (and photography) for a short time, but already was becoming more ambitious (and more interested in purchasing new equipment), and she clearly saw the Flickr network as a learning and teaching space as well as a social network:

Interviewer: So how long have you been on Flickr now, only a little while isn't it?

Louise: Yeah, a couple of months

Interviewer: Are you starting to think more about photography because

of it, do you think?

Louise: Yeah, I'm starting to think more of quality.

Interviewer: Because you know someone's going to see them?

Louise: No! Because I see people with the same camera as me, and what they can achieve. So when you look through the Explore pages, and you see some really good quality photos that were taken with a Nikon D50, you start to think well, obviously these settings *do* have functions [laughs] and so you start to play around with that.

Interviewer: And as part of that have you looked up tutorials and stuff?

Louise: Yeah, and I wanted to buy a lens, so I looked at what the professionals [in the Flickr network] were saying are the lenses to get. To price I'd look at [online catalogues] and I sort of listen to what they're saying [about equipment to get] and plus the person who put me onto Flickr has a more expensive camera than me, but will say with your camera you can do this, and I'll go and do it. Sort of tutor me on how to use the camera a bit, so...I guess I'll probably get to a stage when I'll have to have someone show me. Like go to Photo Continental²⁸ and actually do a course and show me how to do things.

Interviewer: Is that something you think you might do if you have the time, go and do a short course?

²⁸ A local camera and photographic supplies retailer.

Louise: Yeah, although I'm having a lot fun playing around with it now, and because you can take ten photos on different settings, and then say "ah!"

Interviewer: So you can see what happens?

Louise: Yeah, so you can learn, from your mistakes, and that's not a bad way to learn. But I mean, this morning—my son's got his semiformal tonight—and i took a photo of the flowers²⁹ and someone's written [in the comments] that I have a dirty lens...So, I said [in the comments], where, here? [indicating the spot on the photo].

6. Creativity and Aesthetics

The Creative Self

Partly because of the intensity with which Flickr promotes the 'personal' photo-sharing ethic of the network, most Flickr users are not 'professional' photographers, nor are they 'artists' in the sense of fully occupying those identities. However, the participants I interviewed for this project do represent themselves as creative practitioners, or even self-taught artists, and some harbour significant ambitions for their photographic work. Cyron framed his photography as a creative practice, even though he does not actually view himself as a 'creative person':

Cyron: photography is probably the first time that I've ever felt a bit creative. My school life consisted of things like physics and chemistry

²⁹ <http://flickr.com/photos/90222457@N00/215843117/>

and maths, and I couldn't draw a stick figure to save my life, I can't paint, I can't sing, and I don't feel the urge to do any of those typically creative things. [...] It allows me to actually be creative, I can actually produce something, where the end result is that I can actually feel that I've achieved something creative, I've done something.

The reason photography 'allows' him to be creative is that it enables him to produce what is widely understood as 'creative content', rather than providing a vehicle for his 'innate' creativity. Cyron understands his continuing development as a 'creative' photographer as a technical, aesthetic and self-educative process that has enriched his everyday experience in particular ways:

It has changed the way I look at the world because I wander around looking at things from different angles, from different perspectives, trying to—always bearing in mind what might make a good photo and, I mean, I don't profess to be a good photographer, I don't profess to be a bad photographer either, but whatever the case is, I find it very fulfilling for myself. And it's a good thing when other people do as well, when other people look at my work, which is what Flickr has been good for.

As he implied earlier, the acquisition of a digital camera, making it easier to capture and share images, combined with the social networking aspects of his engagement in Flickr, add a layer of 'uses' for personal photography beyond the recording of images, including the ability to 'publish' and receive feedback on his work.

Of the seven participants I interviewed, those who were most invested in 'professional' standards for photography, and who sought out opportunities to learn

‘proper’ photographic techniques, like Cyron, Yinyang and Mr Magoo ICU, were least likely to represent the more ‘private’ aspects of their lives in public, beyond photographs of family members and personal occasions. Conversely, Melanie, who persistently frames herself as ‘self-taught’ and whose practice represents a refusal of institutionalised aesthetics, in her own words ‘takes photos of everything’— hundreds of self-portraits and intimate snapshots of her family members, as well as photographs of flowers, food and her own artworks. In her profile, she describes herself with a long list of identities that cross over the divides between public and private, personal and professional: ‘wife, mother, artist, geek, lover, nanna, tree hugger, web designer, lesbian’. She repeatedly described herself as a self-taught artist who develops autonomously through the process of experimentation, imitation and innovation. This construction of self was reinforced throughout the interview and was particularly marked in the following exchange about how she learned photography:

Interviewer: Did you learn photography at all, or did you teach yourself, or read tutorials and stuff online?

Melanie Cook: No, just taught myself.

Interviewer: Just taught yourself, through...

Melanie Cook: Taking photos.

Interviewer: You didn’t read books, or...

Melanie Cook: No

Interviewer: [So, taking photos] and seeing what happens?

Melanie Cook: Yeah

Interviewer: Before digital?

Melanie Cook: Yeah

Interviewer: Like, F stops and all that sort of stuff?

Melanie Cook: Well, not even really that, I technically couldn't tell you anything about it, I just know what to do. Just through, if I do this I know that's what I'll get.

Melanie has her own online store at <http://shop.wiccked.com> where she sells her handmade jewellery, gift cards, textiles and tarot cards. Referring to the items for sale in the online store, I asked if she was self-taught in craft as well, to which Melanie responded 'Yep, of course.' In response to a further question about whether she has ever done any short courses, or even refers to books to learn how to do things, Melanie said she hadn't.

Melanie Cook: I just look at the pictures, and think "Ooh, I like the look of that" and if I do it I will make it up myself, not look at the book and see how they did it. I'll see their idea but I won't copy their method, I'll make my own.

Melanie mentions the positive feedback she has received from people who she sees as bona fide artists.

Melanie: [...] But it is very odd at first, that people keep saying "Oh but you are an artist!" Like I say, I want to be an artist when I grow up, and

[they say] “you already are”.

All of the participants made mention of occasions when their images had become popular within Flickr, by being favourited and viewed several times, or even ‘making it’ into the Explore pages (based on a high level of ‘interestingness’). Beyond that, several of them had begun to develop aspirations beyond the intrinsic reward system of the Flickr network. For example, David had started to enter amateur photography competitions, and found that the external rewards created additional motivation to pursue his interests:

David: I put some photos into the Samford show and got a couple of awards for it, and I thought, “That’s really cool” and so it sort of buoys you up to go out and show your photos. It’s sort of a snowball effect, once you’ve got people that are regularly looking at your stuff and commenting on it and you’re entering competitions and winning stuff it sort of keeps the whole thing going.

I asked Cyron, who uses Creative Commons licenses on his images, whether any of his photographs had been published or re-used anywhere that he knew of. As part of his response, he told me about a friend of his who makes her living entirely from producing microstock photography. That is, the production of stock images that are not sold outright but uploaded to a web service and licensed multiple times in return for micropayments. There are several web businesses that provide this service, e.g.

istockphoto,³⁰ which was one of the examples of ‘crowdsourcing’ given in a recent *Wired* article (Howe, 2006). Cyron was interested in the possibility of generating income from his photography, but not necessarily in inhabiting the identity of a ‘professional photographer’:

Cyron: I’ve had quite a few people just grab photos and a few people have used them on web pages here and there. But the other thing I’ve started to do is selling microstock. For me I thought, this is a chance to add a bit of extra income, I’ve never really had the goal to make it the entire point of my photography. That’s one thing I’ve noticed about my friend (a professional microstock photographer) is that for her it’s purely work and the idea of photography as a hobby for her has long gone.

Interviewer: But it’s still fun for you?

Cyron: Yes, absolutely, it is, and that’s absolutely the goal, because as I say it’s the only time I’ve felt that I can produce something creative in my life. I’m not going to let that go, because it’s too important.

Mr Magoo ICU, on the other hand, is very invested in the idea of art photography. In his photographic practice, he concentrates mainly on urban exploration photographs of Brisbane, both underground (tunnels, drains and sewers) and overground (abandoned and condemned buildings and construction sites), and is adamant about using lighting and in-camera techniques, rather than Photoshop, to create the surreal and atmospheric effects that characterise his images. Some months before our

³⁰ See <http://istockphoto.com>

interview, he had attended the Sleepy City photographic exhibition, showcasing work by fellow urban explorer 'dsankt'. He fell into a conversation with the exhibition organiser, during which he mentioned that he was a photographer as well, and, curiosity piqued, she asked for his website address. After viewing some of his images on the Flickr website, she called to offer him an exhibition. Mr Magoo ICU decided to invite two other photographers who he knew only through the Flickr Brisbanites group (monkeyc.net and asterope) to exhibit with him, and to broaden the scope to include aboveground as well as underground photographs of Brisbane for 'variety'. He says the exhibition was well attended, that they had a 'pretty good' response to the work, and that he has since sold some of his pieces. He was also thinking about selling the large prints from the exhibition 'at the markets or something like that'. In our interview, I asked him whether the exhibition had encouraged him to think more about his photography 'as a serious going concern for the future'. His response clearly demonstrates that, although he earns his living from IT, his photographic practice is far from a casual leisure pursuit, and he differentiates himself from personal or everyday photography as well as commercial 'stock' photography on the basis of his technical expertise, artistic sensibilities and professional aspirations, placing him squarely in the 'ProAm' (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004) category:

Mr Magoo ICU: Yeah, it's always something that's been in the back of my mind. I know I don't want to do IT forever. It pays well, I enjoy doing the work, so it affords me the hobbies that I have, being photography. Yeah, it's something I'd like to get into, but I'm still trying to think of a way to enter that market which is already saturated by any

man and his dog that can buy a point and shoot camera, basically, can try and sell them. I mean I've seen some really good stuff at the markets, I've seen some average stuff as well. I figure that maybe I'm fitting in somewhere in the middle, perhaps more so the type of the photography that I enjoy being the night work, tunnel work, and all that sort of thing which some people are just blown away by, they've never seen anything like it before, especially when it's a night-time shot, people say "It looks like daytime!" You know, they don't understand long exposures and all that sort of thing, so they can really appreciate I guess the work that's gone into it when they realise where it was taken and at what time and that sort of thing, and I haven't seen much of that sort of stuff around for sale so I figure I can maybe use that as my entry point and as being something unique, because it's really hard to be unique when there's so much stuff out there.

Negotiating Aesthetics

The Flickr network overall, and the many diverse sub-communities within it, effectively represent vernacular artworlds, where issues of 'best practice', 'good photography' and appropriate social conduct are negotiated and norms are established, however transiently. But Flickr is also a space where 'professional' photographic aesthetics, 'art' discourses and vernacular photography collide, compete and coexist. Aesthetics are continuously negotiated and contested through all the activities that constitute the Flickr network, but these negotiations are particularly obvious in group descriptions and rules, which may or may not be reflected in the group aesthetic that emerges via repetition as member images

accumulate. There are groups for cat photos, where the aim is to represent the cuteness or craziness of one's pet; at the other end of the scale there are 'serious' photography groups like the one for JPG Magazine, whose guidelines read:

What TO post: Photos that you took, with minimal Photoshopping, and nothing added digitally. Only one photo a day.

What NOT to post: Photos by other people, photos with borders, scans of things that aren't photos, illustrations, paintings, overtly manipulated images, partial desaturation (aka cutouts), photos with digitally-added text, multiple photos in a single image.

Cliches to AVOID: Photos of your kids, your pets, your dinner, your computer. Sunsets. Flowers. Snapshots.

What we WANT: Your best photos, your favorite photos, photos that you look at and think, you know, there's something really special about this one, and I'd like to share it with other people who have a thing for photography

What we LOVE: Originality. Bravery. Surprise.

Each of the thousands of groups in Flickr, like the Flickr 'community' as a whole, are communities of practice (Johnson, 2001) built on a common base architecture, but with their extremely diverse content, purposes, scope and aesthetics determined over time by the activities of the group members.

The participants also discuss, deliberate and negotiate photographic aesthetics by participating in conversations that are mirrored in the art world, the photographic

profession, and in the institutions of ‘official’ amateur photography such as camera clubs. Yinyang explained how his participation brought him into contact with photography as an art form with a history, and how that knowledge enabled him to understand and participate in aesthetic debates:

Yinyang: I suppose that’s the other thing, with any kind of hobby, once you start getting into it you start reading more and more stuff about it, history, and...finding out about some of the legends of photography.

He points me to a discussion in one of the Flickr groups about Henri Cartier-Bresson that emerged as the result of a prank where a user had uploaded a Cartier-Bresson image in order to draw the predictable and pedantic critiques from ‘experts’ on the technical rules of ‘good photography’. Yinyang said that he found this discussion very interesting—for him, it caused him to consider the question of whether an aesthetic judgement should be based on objective ‘rules’, or whether it should be relative to the social and historical context in which the work was produced:

Yinyang: It does kind of highlight, I suppose the wanky side of art, you know, just because you have an appreciation of the art, does that make you a better critic of the photo than someone who doesn’t have that grounding in history, and they look at it as a photo?

For most of the participants, the greater their investment and participation in the Flickr network had become over time, the greater their interest in producing ‘good’ images became also. Throughout the participants’ discussion of their photographic practice and its development is the underlying assumption of an ideal progression from everyday documentary photography—photographing the family, family events,

holidays, or just ‘photos of everything’—to better or more advanced photography. The characteristics of ‘better photography’ vary among the participants in ways that fit with expert discourses of photography as craft, profession, or art. Some of the participants privileged technological sophistication, mastery and control. Yinyang, who was doing a photography course in his spare time, was most interested in mastering mainstream ‘professional’ photographic techniques:

Yinyang: One of the [groups] that I happened upon by chance was the Bokeh one. Bokeh is when you take a photo where you focus quite close and blur the background so you’ve got a very small depth of field. You don’t do it in Photoshop. Depending on the shape of the lens...you get the points of light in the background, if it’s really good Bokeh it highlights the shape of your lens a bit, whether it’s round or hexagonal, you get these nice little shapes, and it’s more noticeable when you’ve got light in the background. There’s supposed to be this whole aesthetic about it.

Yinyang went on to discuss the impact of digital technologies on the techniques of photography, and spoke admiringly of the deeply ingrained technical knowledge that professional film photographers have—for example, the skill involved in colour casting and filters using a film camera, and being able to calculate white balance mentally.

Mr Magoo ICU represented his practice in ways that differentiate it from vernacular photography, instead reproducing the discourses of art photography, where creativity

is constituted via a balance between technical problem-solving and aesthetic innovation (or ‘something different’):

Mr Magoo ICU: You know, a photo of a bee on a flower doesn’t really inspire much, you know, anyone can take that in their garden. I try to be a bit more...end up being more creative in a way because you put a lot of thought into the shot, the lighting, and you use the torch or the light on a canvas, which is everything you can see around you that is black. And you sort of highlight and illuminate different areas of the scene to bring out detail. There’s certainly no light down in the tunnel so you’ve got to use torches and flashes and whatever else, in some cases fireworks and that sort of thing to light it up...LED lights for cool effects, torches for warm effects. You just try to think of the different ways you can use light. It depends on the effect that you want, but I guess that’s the bit that interests me the most is working out different ways that I can use that to create a different scene.

Shanrosen, who was also explicitly concerned with ‘art’, privileged the development of an ‘eye’, or ‘seeing things differently’, actively resisting the principles of ‘good photography’—the rule of thirds, sharpness, depth of field, and so on—associated with camera clubs and professional photographic societies. Some of the participants spoke of having their eyes opened to different subjects and approaches, or being inspired by other users to try something new:

Louise: So Steve [a fellow member of the Brisbane Meetup group] doesn’t do photos of his kids, or crummy boring stuff, he does

interesting photos, or he tries to. So I think he does more along the lines of the art theme, and I really like that, and I think that's something I could see would be fun to do. [...] from an art point of view I see that it will very quickly develop into that, more than taking happy snaps of my kids and what have you.

Beyond the collaborative construction and contestation of aesthetics within Flickr, the database structures, and the way they are navigated via the user interface, can be seen as an 'architecture of participation' that shapes the culture of Flickr so that social connection is primary, and formal aesthetics are secondary. Therefore, Flickr can be viewed as the site of a vernacular 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud, 2002), where the 'object' of the aesthetic is no longer the image itself, but the 'modes of social connection' (McQuire, 2006: 263) that are both made possible by and flow through the image. In this context, 'content' is not a commodity that can be exchanged, but a means of social connection; at the same time, those social connections are used to collaborate, learn and teach photographic aesthetics and techniques. Flickr is at the same time a showcase for one's own work, an exhibition of everyone else's work, a social network, and a learning community, but each of these dynamics can be foregrounded or backgrounded, depending on the interests and aspirations of each participant.

Cyron and Yinyang focus most on the affordances of Flickr as a showcase and a learning space:

Cyron: what I've found from Flickr is it has done two real things that have I guess appealed to me. Firstly, I can see what other people have

done, and I know that a lot of these other people are just like me, they're not professional photographers, a lot of them are professional photographers but most of them aren't. And I look at the stuff they've done and I find inspiration in the things they've done, I can look at something and go "Oh, wow, I'd never have thought of that" or "that's just amazing," and you try and take away bits and pieces of that to add to my own understanding. And at the same time it's always good for the ego when people appreciate your work.

Yinyang: It's a very, very good showcase for photography in general, but it's very multilayered, depending on your needs, how deep you go into those layers. So whether you do just use Flickr as a photosharing thing, or whether you want to use it as an area where you can get ideas for photography, or whether you want to use it showcase your photography, or to a certain degree whether you want to use it as a kind of development tool for your own photography.

In the following exchange about her particular mode of participation in Flickr, Louise, who is interested in the 'fun' and 'social' aspects of Flickr as much as the opportunities for aesthetic or technological development, weaves together online and offline social interaction, learning, and play in her discussion of what makes Flickr an engaging space for her:

Louise: It has to expand. I'm not happy just doing the task, I want to know why, and then I want to take it a bit further...and then you accelerate up and then someone sees you and pulls you over here and

then you accelerate up, it's the same thing here [as in games], to develop the skill, to a level. But it's fun along the way, the journey is the game, the journey is the fun. So I get a lot of fun out of it, I learn a lot, and it makes taking a photo more fun, because like my husband goes "Oh, that's nice" but here—lots of people are seeing it and saying...[for example] you've got a dirty lens! or "that's great!" [...] And then you meet them socially, and you have a nice time, and you have a common thread of taking photographs. [...] So [Flickr] has great momentum, because there's a common theme.

7. Cultural Citizenship and the Local

There are countless examples, as implied above, of the ways in which participation in Flickr has enabled a range of unintended consequences that constitute the practice of cultural citizenship. But it is important to point out that the practice of cultural citizenship in relation to Flickr is constituted not only online, but also through the articulation of the 'online' social network with everyday, local experience. One of the most important features of Flickr is the ability to create 'groups'—communities of interest and practice—within the network. There is one such group, Brisbanites, for uploading and discussing images of Brisbane. As well as hosting photos of everyday life, tourist images, and photographs of urban decay, recently the group became the locus of vernacular history when an Italian user known on the network as 'Pizzodesevo', now resettled in Italy but who had been resident in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, began posting scans of slides taken at that time to the Brisbanites

group.³¹ A number of group members showed interest in the photographs by leaving comments that ranged from expressing appreciation to offering technical advice about scanning, to discussion of the locations of the photographs and how much they had changed in the past 46 years. The connections made between users as part of this discussion resulted in one Brisbane-based member of the Brisbanite groups spontaneously creating a kind of game around the images: he began going out specifically to capture images of the same locations as in the old slides, and uploading them to his own Flickr photostream. ‘Pizzodesevo’ then combined some of these new images side by side with the old ones in a series of diptyches that reveal the often dramatic changes to the Brisbane cityscape, which in turn led to more discussion about the ways in which the city has changed, blended with nostalgia for a past that many of the discussants had never encountered themselves.

In another example, Louise, one of the participants in this study, started the ‘Themed Flickr Photos’³² group, where users collaborate to establish a subject that might be found in almost any city in the world, go out to capture images of that subject in their own towns, and then upload them to the group photo pool. Past ‘themes’ have included McDonalds restaurants, traffic, and shoe stores. Louise told me that she had the idea after coming across a photo from Canada of a place called the Tongue & Groove. Remembering that there was a Brisbane restaurant with the same name, she drove to West End and took a photo of it, uploaded it and let the Canadian

³¹ See <http://www.flickr.com/photos/globetrotter1937/195304137>

³² <http://flickr.com/groups/55001358@N00/>

photographer know by leaving a comment on his original photo. The Canadian photographer suggested that she expand the idea into a group where common features of cities could be photographed on opposite sides of the globe and shared in the group pool.

Members of the Brisbanites group have also begun organising regular offline meetups—opportunities for socialising combined with photographic expeditions in the city, suburbs or surrounds. All but one of the participants I interviewed had attended at least one of these occasions. The ongoing participation in meetups has several effects: the cultural practice of ‘belonging’ in the city, especially as the photographs of the meetup and other Brisbanites photos are circulated as vernacular representations of ‘Brisbaneness’ in the cultural public sphere; intensified and more meaningful everyday creative practice via the collaborative photographic excursions; and an intensification of the ‘community of practice’ (via comparing uploaded images of the meetup, as well as members giving each other technical and aesthetic feedback and advice); recursively enriching both online and offline social and aesthetic engagement. As an example, one of these meetups took place as a ride on the CityCat, beginning at the Regatta terminal and disembarking at the University of Queensland, which was at the time the construction site for a new and quite controversial ‘Green Bridge’ project.³³ As the group, made up of people with a range of ages, identities and occupations, wandered along the riverbank taking photographs

³³ The Green Bridge is a project of the Brisbane City Council. In an effort to reduce traffic congestion without negatively impacting the environment, the bridge will provide a bus, pedestrian and cycle link between Dutton Park and University of Queensland, but will be closed to cars and trucks.

and talking, the conversation flowed seamlessly between a wide range of topics: comparisons of cameras, advice about technical settings for particular shots, as well as the beauty (or otherwise) of the surroundings, discussions about the Flickr network, and most interestingly, deliberation regarding the Green Bridge: What should it be called? Should it be there at all? Is it beautiful? Is it good for the environment? When will the ‘golden hour’ just before sunset start, so we can get a great shot of it? Upon returning home from the meetup, most participants upload their ‘best’ shots from the event to the meetup group’s pool of images so that other group members can view and comment on them, often leading to a continuation of the discussions that occurred during the meetup itself.

Such participation can and does take the form of what Habermas (1996) terms ‘episodic publics’—the ephemeral everyday encounters in taverns or trains where citizens negotiate (or, in rationalist terms, ‘deliberate’) matters of shared concern; or, ‘occasional publics’—where groups of citizens gather for particular occasions (the rock concert, the public funeral). The mode of participation in Flickr that most obviously constitutes civic engagement, then, is a convergence of ‘offline’ everyday life in a particular local context with ‘online’ participation in digital culture and with cultural and commodity consumption. That is, the representation of the local, the lived, the specific; flowing into the discussion or negotiation of discourse *around* those representations, and the participation in communities within the Flickr network that may reference or flow back into offline social lives.

8. Discussion

The examples given above are deliberately unspectacular and routine examples of some of the ways in which a rich engagement with the affordances of Flickr has unintended consequences that constitute the practice of everyday cultural citizenship. But what are the preconditions for these forms of participation? If amateur photography in the twentieth century was defined by Kodak's slogan, 'You push the button, we do the rest', then the slogan of Web 2.0 models of amateur creativity such as Flickr's might be, 'Here are the buttons, *you* do the rest.' Where the Kodak system disciplined photography, Flickr is characterised by soft controls and deep structures that allow an enormous amount of freedom, and the social and aesthetic conventions of practice are softly shaped by both the company and the users, rather than being overtly 'taught' by the architecture. At the same time, these affordances of Flickr need to be discovered and mastered by individual users.

At a bare minimum, each individual needs to be able to use a camera (as well as to select and frame a subject) in order to capture images. This seems so commonsense as to be hardly worth pointing out; indeed, the everyday practice of photography seems so natural to most contemporary citizens that it doesn't appear to require any particular skills or competencies at all. However, as the previous chapter demonstrated, the naturalisation of photography as a practice is the result of a cultural *process* that took place over time, resulting in widespread shared understandings of photographic aesthetics, technologies and literacies. It is only because of this shared understanding of the everyday practice of photography that Flickr is viable as an enterprise in the first place.

But in order to participate in Flickr, especially in ways that constitute the practice of cultural citizenship, there is a range of knowledges and competencies required that, while they also may appear obvious, are not so widely shared. Most obviously, in order to participate, each user needs to be aware of the existence of Flickr and at least some of its possible uses, as well as how to sign up and upload images. But in order to become visible to other members of the Flickr user community, the user needs to know how to give images descriptive titles and tags that will make the image appear in search results, and find interest groups to join. At a deeper level again, normative 'active' cultural participation in Flickr involves much more than showcasing one's own work, instead requiring participation in 'community' activities such as sharing information, commenting on others' work, and engaging in discussion or collaboration.

The norms of new media literacy that are co-constructed by technological affordances, user behaviour and the social shaping of participatory culture map onto some of the dominant emerging norms of everyday creative and social practice in digital culture. At the level of cultural participation through the contribution of content, the first of these norms is the positive value of continuous, active participation in content creation that is iterative, accretive and palimpsestic in nature. Socially, networked individualism is emerging as a normative mode of social organisation; and correspondingly, the network as conversation (rather than 'distribution' mechanism) is emerging as a normative mode of creative practice. Third, in relation to technology, it is pro-active discovery, tweaking and technological mastery that are preconditions of playful, productive participation.

Industry research confirms that a large majority of users of user-generated content networks and social networks are lurkers (Horowitz, 2006). Further, given that in 2004, 62% of American Internet users (already an over-represented group in global terms) did not even know what a blog was, it is reasonable to assume that the most active members of Flickr are a small minority nested within an even smaller minority of the world's population. Neither the Flickr nor the Yahoo! website provides official numbers of subscribers or photos, but a 2005 news report citing a 'company spokesman' states that Flickr had 775,000 registered users and 19,5 million photos, with a 30 percent monthly growth rate (Kuchinskas, 2005). In comparison, the world's 'Internet population' (the number of people who have access to the Internet) was estimated in 2005 to be 1.08 billion (CIA World Factbook, 2005), which would make the total number of people who are signed up at Flickr only around 0.08% of all Internet users.

When learning to blog as part of their university coursework, I have found that most students quickly grasp the mechanics of writing and posting entries, but not how, or indeed *why* they should engage in the idea of a wider 'blogosphere' or 'network as conversation'—cultural competencies that make up what Jill Walker insists we should understand, and teach, as network literacies (Burgess, 2006; Walker, 2005).

Likewise, at the entry level of participation in Flickr, the most intuitively obvious 'use' of the network is simply to upload some photos and to view Flickr as an online repository for one's personal images. But the understanding of the network, not as a 'publishing' or 'distribution' medium, but as a *social* space, is both the most frequently claimed feature of 'Web 2.0' and 'architectures of participation', and the least intuitive for novice users. The take-up of opportunities to engage at all possible

levels, to hack, modify or innovate—or to take up positions of community leadership, is restricted to an even smaller minority.

It seems clear that in terms of network literacies, the collective practices of Flickr users work to construct norms that are absolutely not obvious to novice users, precisely *because* they are not ‘taught’ top-down. Rather, they are learned through everyday practice and become naturalised to the point that they appear to be seamlessly continuous with everyday life. There is also a politics of time involved in new media participation. Most significantly, ‘active’ cultural citizenship in the parts of the networked cultural public sphere, like Flickr, that are built around ‘dynamic’ content requires continuous, active participation. Quite apart from the accumulation of status, even simple visibility to the ‘community’ requires regular activity in order to mark presence. The value of continuous participation is built into the architecture through functionality such as displaying the most recently uploaded photographs in a group pool first, the daily updating of the ‘interestingness’ page, and through the hierarchical ordering of each user’s contact list according to most recent uploads. This means that, not only users, but also the individual cultural artefacts that they create, are lost to view in the absence of continuous cultural production.

A deep or intense engagement with the ‘creative literacies’ and aesthetics of photography is actually entirely optional for active participation in Flickr, but I have found in my research that these often become increasingly compelling factors in the *ongoing* integration of Flickr with everyday life. That is, people become increasingly interested in ‘better photography’ as they become more deeply engaged with the various layers of possible participation; and a growing interest in photography drives

a deeper engagement with the Flickr network. The participants spoke at great length about how they had learned or were learning photography, describing Flickr as both a showcase and a learning space for photography; but they spoke very little about how they had learned to participate effectively in online social networks, saying things like, ‘as I went along, I started getting more into group’, or talking about ‘stumbling’ upon or being introduced to various websites and online communities back in the 1990s, or simply shrugging the question off. In fact, the interviewees had not all been particularly interested or skilled in photography when they joined Flickr, but with the exception of Louise who learned to use a computer when she returned to formal study after having children, all had been extremely active computer and Internet users for decades, if not for most of their lives. So, the competencies of network literacy that are necessary for deep participation in networks like Flickr over time become part of the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977: 17-18) of the most prolific and persistent early adopters and expert users: a group of people not necessarily high in traditional cultural or educational capital but schooled to the point of naturalisation in the technical and cultural competencies that allow them to participate in each ‘next big thing’ that comes along in Internet culture.

If we are interested in the extension of new media literacy in the interests of cultural participation, where does this leave us? It is not immediately clear how the ‘user-led content revolution’ on the web serves the interests and concerns of those who have compelling stories to tell but whose cultural and technological competencies are not aligned with these emerging norms of new media literacy. It is precisely this question that is addressed in the next chapter on the Digital Storytelling movement, where vernacular creativity articulates not to Web 2.0 business models, but to

community media, civil society, government and public service broadcasting.

Chapter 5

Case Study: The Digital Storytelling Movement

Everyone has a powerful story to tell. You cannot experience life without insights about your experience, which are valuable to a larger audience. Most people's perception of living a quiet, mundane, uninteresting, unmemorable life masks a vivid, complex, and rich source of stories to share. (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2006b)

1. Introduction

Although the term 'digital storytelling' has been used generically to describe the uses or affordances of new media for new or innovative narrative forms, as exemplified by 'hypertext fiction' and game narratives (Murray, 1997; Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan, 2004), here I use it—with uppercase initials—to refer to the specific modes of production, technological apparatus and textual characteristics of the community media movement that is known explicitly as 'Digital Storytelling' (Lambert, 2006). Digital Storytelling is a workshop-based process by which 'ordinary people' create their own short autobiographical films that can be streamed on the web or broadcast on television. This form of Digital Storytelling can be understood not only as a media form, but as a field of cultural practice: Digital Storytelling workshops are sites of the relations between textual arrangements and symbolic conventions, technologies for production and conventions for their use; and collaborative social interaction in local and specific contexts. While it is of course

texts, known as ‘digital stories’, that are the outcome of this process, in this study, I am not concerned predominantly with the textual relations between digital stories and other forms of digital narrative. Rather, the core concerns for this thesis are the modes of cultural production that characterise Digital Storytelling, including who has access to those modes of production, and how the resultant texts are shaped by the specific institutional and social contexts in which production occurs.

The model of Digital Storytelling I will discuss in this chapter originated as the result of numerous collaborations among community media practitioners and activists in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1990s. Dana Atchley, a media producer and an artist in numerous disciplines, had developed a multimedia autobiography called NEXT EXIT, which drew the attention of local theatre producer/dramatic consultant Joe Lambert, who became a collaborator in developing the piece. In 1994, Lambert and Atchley, with Nina Mullen, founded the San Francisco Digital Media Center. The Center was built around a unique training process, the Digital Storytelling Workshop (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2006a). The Center for Digital Storytelling remains the cultural leader of Digital Storytelling as a form and a social practice, and a powerful force in defining its ethics, aesthetics and modes of production. The ideological articulation of activism, community arts and the therapeutic aspects of individualistic ‘self-expression’ is expressed clearly in this statement about the Center for Digital Storytelling’s history:

Corresponding directly to the extension of civil, economic, and political rights in the larger civic society, the community artist imagined the extension of technical and aesthetic training in the arts as a civil right.

They focused their efforts in providing access to all sectors of the population that were seen to be underserved by the traditional education and vocational training systems. The art they create with these communities of individuals was a synthesis of their vision as a cultural animator and the unique gifts, voices, and ideas of the participating members in their projects. At times these projects specifically address social conflicts and political issues as the subject of the art making, at other times, the emphasis was on personal voice and the development of identity, esteem, and resilience in the individual. (Center for Digital Storytelling, 2006a)

Since then, there has been a significant take-up of the Digital Storytelling form and workshop process in US educational contexts, as well as community media contexts and cultural institutions in several countries. Examples include the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), which regularly runs Digital Storytelling workshops and features digital stories in its exhibitions and installations, and a wide range of community-based projects in the US, such as the Stories of Service project, which runs digital storytelling workshops with returned servicemen and women in collaboration with youth volunteers, and publishes the stories at its website.³⁴

Digital Storytelling was adapted for BBC Wales in 2001 by the social documentary photographer and educator Daniel Meadows, after he attended a workshop at the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California (Meadows, 2003). Meadows is

³⁴ <http://www.digiclub.org/sofs/>

best known for his project *Living Like This: Photographs from the Free Photographic Omnibus* (1973-1975).³⁵ In this project, Meadows travelled around England for 14 months in a modified double-decker bus that functioned as a darkroom, living space and mobile gallery, inviting people to pose for street portraits in exchange for free copies of the photographs. He returned in the 1990s, photographing many of the original subjects of the photographs again. At the time the research for the present study was undertaken, Meadows was Creative Director of the *Capture Wales* program, on secondment from Cardiff University, where he is a lecturer in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.

In April 2004, Meadows was invited to QUT's Creative Industries Faculty to conduct a 'train-the-trainers' workshop with seven research staff and students, of whom I was one. Since mid-2004, I have been one of a team of QUT researchers engaged in 'research-based practice' to adapt the BBC model of Digital Storytelling practice (Meadows, 2004) for community media projects. I have worked as a researcher and trainer in some of the Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) workshops with young people at various locations around Queensland, as well as leading a pilot workshop for the Kelvin Grove Urban Village Sharing Stories project that involved mainly older participants. This chapter begins with the general case—the core characteristics of Digital Storytelling across several contexts, and moves to the specific articulations of the form with three different contexts of use—BBC *Capture Wales*, the Youth Internet Radio Network, and Kelvin Grove Urban Village

³⁵ See <http://www.photobus.co.uk>

Sharing Stories. As the discussion moves through these three projects, the focus progressively shifts from the shaping of participation through the practice and discourses emanating from the ‘provider’ (*Capture Wales*); to the social identity construction of participants and the content of their stories (the Youth Internet Radio Network project); and finally to the ways in which participation in Digital Storytelling workshops is highly productive of and integrates with social networks and the formation of micro-publics (the Kelvin Grove Urban Village *Sharing Stories* project). This progressive shift of focus is done partly to avoid repetition, and partly as a reflection of the ways each of these aspects of Digital Storytelling as a cultural practice actually is brought into relief through its articulation with the particular social contexts of its use.

2. Overview

Across several national, institutional and ideological contexts, the ideal of Digital Storytelling retains some core characteristics both as an aesthetic form and as a social practice. Digital Storytelling as a ‘movement’ is explicitly designed to amplify the ordinary voice. It aims not only to remediate vernacular creativity, but also to *legitimate* it as a relatively autonomous and worthwhile contribution to public culture. In practice, the form balances the ethics of democratic ‘access’ with an aesthetic that aims to maximise relevance and impact. Economy is a core principle of this aesthetic – stories are short (somewhere between two to five minutes), using scripts of around 250 words that are then recorded as voiceovers, and a dozen images, usually brought from home. The philosophy behind this economy is that formal constraints create the ideal conditions for the production of elegant, high-

impact stories by people with little or no experience, with minimal direct intervention by the workshop facilitator. The personal narrative, told in the storyteller's unique voice, is central to the process of creating a story and is given priority in the arrangement of symbolic elements. Narrative accessibility, warmth, and presence are prioritised over formal experimentation or innovative 'new' uses for technologies.

Whether in the US, BBC *Capture Wales*, or in projects undertaken at QUT, the collaborative workshop, led by a team of trainers, is the core of Digital Storytelling. The length and format of workshops vary slightly, but all Digital Storytelling workshops that are based on the Center for Digital Storytelling's original model, however loosely, share certain features in common. The most important of these is the 'story circle', where the participants play storytelling 'games', share information and anecdotes about themselves, and engage in creative writing exercises. The basic story ideas based on each person's personal autobiography are developed during this process, and it is from this process that a written script and storyboard on which the digital story will be based emerges. These scripts are then recorded as voice-overs by the participants. Once the accompanying images are selected (usually from photo albums) or captured and edited if necessary, the audio and visual elements are combined in a video editing application such as Adobe Premiere or Apple's iMovie to produce a digital video that is of sufficient technical quality for web streaming, broadcast, or DVD distribution.

Table 2: Sample Workshop Schedule

Day 1	Introduction to Digital Storytelling, viewing of examples Story circle Discussing and developing story ideas
Day 2	Final script development Voice-over recording Scanning images/capturing new images
Day 3	Preparing/editing images in Adobe Photoshop Assembly in Adobe Premiere/Apple iMovie
Day 4	Adding Special Effects Final editing Exporting to web/DVD formats Screening for participants, family and friends

Digital Storytelling is explicitly designed to remediate vernacular creativity in new media contexts: it is based on everyday communicative practices—telling personal stories, collecting, and sharing personal images—but remixed with the textual idioms of television and film; and transformed into publicly accessible culture through the use of digital tools for production and distribution. Through this process of remediation, Digital Storytelling transforms everyday experience into shared public culture. It is above all an example of creativity in the service of effective social communication, where communication is not to be understood narrowly as the exchange of information or ‘ideas’, but as the affective practice of the social.

Digital Storytelling gathers some of its democratic potential from the fact that it draws on vernacular literacies—skills and competencies that cannot simply be reduced to cultural capital or an ‘artistic’ education but that instead exploit

competencies built up through everyday experience, especially experience as a mass media consumer. The competencies required for Digital Storytelling therefore cross the divide between formal and informal learning. They include not only ‘learned’ skills like the ability to conceive and execute an effective narrative and use a computer (in which the participants are guided by the more expert trainers), but also the more intuitive and vernacular modes of collecting and arranging textual elements (as for scrapbooking), the oral performance of personal stories (learned through everyday social interaction), and the combination of sonic and visual elements to create televisual flow (learned through the consumption of television, film and animation). Based on these general characteristics and ideals, the remainder of this chapter examines Digital Storytelling in specific contexts to understand how, in practice it shapes the remediation of vernacular creativity in particular ways.

3. The BBC *Capture Wales* Model

Background

Since 2001, the BBC *Capture Wales* project has been running Digital Storytelling workshops around Wales. The project has also been extended to England and Northern Ireland under the title ‘Telling Lives’. The digital stories produced in *Capture Wales* workshops are uploaded to the *Capture Wales* website³⁶, along with some biographical information about each participant, a transcript of the voiceover, and a link inviting visitors to comment on each of the stories. A selection of stories is broadcast as part of the ‘Your Stories’ program on BBCi, the BBC’s digital satellite

³⁶ <http://bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales>

channel; some stories are also aired on the flagship BBC Wales News programme Wales Today and on BBC2W, BBC's digital television channel for Wales. The *Capture Wales* project fits into two of five 'structural forms of mediated exchange' that, Georgina Born (2005: 515-16) argues, characterise the BBC's recent initiatives that engage with the possibilities of new media. The first of these is what Born calls 'inter-cultural communication', where 'universal channels become the means of exposure to and connection with others' imaginative and expressive worlds'; secondly, *Capture Wales* works as a form of 'mediated community' that comprises 'territorially-based local and regional community networks'.

My introduction to the ethos and practice of the *Capture Wales* model of Digital Storytelling originally came from my participation in the original 'train-the-trainers' workshop, led by *Capture Wales*' Creative Director Daniel Meadows, at QUT in April 2004. I also participated in an additional 'experimental' workshop led by Meadows at QUT in November 2005 and throughout the period of my research have exchanged emails with him. However, the bulk of the empirical research on the *Capture Wales* model of Digital Storytelling was gathered during a fieldwork visit to the UK in January 2006, which included a visit to the BBC Wales studios, extended interviews with Meadows and Gareth Morlais, and observation of a *Capture Wales* workshop.

The workshop I observed while on site in Wales was a train-the-trainers workshop that BBC *Capture Wales* was conducting in partnership with Canllaw Online, a not-

for-profit youth organisation focused around information services.³⁷ The organisation has several IT centres around Wales, and was interested in partnering with the BBC *Capture Wales* Digital Storytelling program to extend their service provision beyond business-oriented, instrumental computer literacy in keeping with their aims as an organisation:

Canllaw Online aims to bring better life choices to young people throughout Wales through access to quality information services. This is being achieved through improved information delivery services to encourage inter-cultural awareness and development, youth mobility, participation, expression and equality.

The participants at the workshop were sent as delegates from several of these IT centres, with a view to having them return as trained Digital Storytelling trainers, able to deliver workshops in their local areas. The initial meeting between the BBC *Capture Wales* team and the participants and the first ‘story circle’ day were held at the Caerphilly offices of Canllaw Online. The ‘production’ days of the workshop were held in the function rooms of the New House Hotel, Thornhill, a country hotel just outside of Caerphilly.

³⁷ According to the Canllaw Online website at <http://www.canllaw-online.com/>, the organisation was ‘established to develop and support information services for young people, offering a number of bilingual services linked to information distribution through a series of unique initiatives, to both young people and information providers for young people. The Digital Storytelling plans of the organization were linked to the Credu program, a multi-million pound project created by Canllaw Online and Fujitsu Services to provide a network of 82 ‘Digilabs’ across Wales.

Ethics and Aesthetics

The ‘public service broadcasting’ ideology behind the *Capture Wales* model of Digital Storytelling is echoed in Murdock and Golding’s (2004: 258) analysis of what is needed to bring about what they call ‘full citizenship’ in the ‘digital age’. Rather than viewing digital culture as a progressive alternative to any and all broadcast media, they argue that public broadcasting is the best potential site of a ‘digital commons’ for citizenship, which in turn requires ‘personal creativity and participation’ as well as ‘collective debate’. Public broadcasting, they write, has three advantages. First, it is ‘an already familiar, valued, and trusted presence in people’s lives’. Second, it is ‘free at the point of use’. Third, it ‘addresses audiences as members of moral and social communities rather than consumers with current credit cards.’ In Murdock & Golding’s model of the digital commons, citizenship—practiced by way of ‘collective debate’ and membership of ‘moral and social communities’—and consumption—ownership of ‘credit cards’—are separate domains, rather than convergent ones, in everyday life.

The authors go on to specify ‘three minimum conditions’ for the construction of this ‘new communal space’:

First, it must operate horizontally as well as vertically. Second, it must find productive ways of harnessing both the expertise and resources offered by public broadcasters and other public institutions – libraries, museums, galleries, and universities – with the vitality and grassroots participation fostered by universality of access by making the necessary equipment available to anyone who wants it. Finding creative and practical solutions to these challenges is arguably the most important

task now facing anyone committed to providing the minimal conditions for digital citizenship.

Contrary to the emerging norms of ‘participatory’ new media culture, for Murdock & Golding, ‘grassroots’ or ‘bottom-up’ cultural participation is not seen as a positive development because it is potentially *disruptive* to the authority of the mass media; rather, its democratic potential is realised only if it can be productively harnessed to the cultural authority, ubiquity, trustworthiness and expertise of the public broadcasting sector, and therefore operate as an articulation of (authentic) grass-roots expression with the benevolent public institution, that exists somehow *outside* of the market. For Murdock and Golding as well as for Meadows, community is a pre-existing social good that can both benefit from and be ‘harnessed’ for wider improvements to society with the aid of benevolent institutions, contrasting with the reliance on ‘bottom-up’, autonomous individual expression derived from the Californian model of Digital Storytelling. Meadows explicitly positions himself in both an aesthetic and a political sense as a cultural intermediary between the ‘grassroots’ domain of ‘citizens media’ and the institutional domain of the BBC—or ‘big media’, as he calls it. His own biography as read through his own digital stories³⁸ establishes his credentials both as an artist and as an anti-establishment advocate of the right to self-mediated representation for ‘ordinary people’. This self-mediated representation, however, does not really occur autonomously, but is

³⁸ Daniel Meadows’ personal website Photobus, which contains content relating both to his social documentary photography project from which the website gets its name and several of his own autobiographical digital stories, is at <http://www.photobus.ac.uk>

supported and guided by both trainers and fellow participants as part of the workshop process. The Digital Storytelling *workshop*, and not only the textual form of the digital story, is an essential component of the remediation of the most quotidian and powerful practice of vernacular creativity: everyday storytelling.

Daniel Meadows: The thing that we've found more than anything [is] that...we are trying to help people tell stories, and people feel that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for them to tell their story and for it to be remembered they want to tell stories that are important to them. And to get the confidence to do that—to tell a story that's important to you—can only really be gained through a workshop experience where you're supported and helped and encouraged. And then also you see how your story is reacted to by other people. So you tell something and other people don't understand it, you go "ok, that's fair enough but then they're also encouraging me to find, to understand it, so they'll keep asking me questions until I get it right"

Interviewer: So it's like working with a micro-public?

Daniel Meadows: Yes, it's like having a little audience there. But you're also helping them with their stories, so there's this mutual support thing which actually models the way in which people sit in pubs and tell stories to each other. I mean they might be a bit more aggressive about it—"what the fuck to you mean there?" kind of thing, 'cause they're pissed or whatever but the bottom line is you're sitting around a table, you're trying to have a nice time, you're sharing stories with each

other—the Digital Storytelling circle is pretty much like that. Except that its principle function is to encourage people, not take the mick out of them. Whereas in the pub you'd probably get the mick taken out of you if you don't tell your story right, you know. But it's not a model that is so far removed from our daily experience, it's just tweaked in order to give people encouragement to believe that their story's worth telling and worth listening to.

At the same time, as creative director of the BBC's *Capture Wales* Digital Storytelling program Meadows operates as a rebel within, working both against and behalf of an institution from the domain that he consistently referred to as 'Big Media'. As part of a discussion about alternative, perhaps less resource-intensive models of Digital Storytelling, Meadows spoke quite approvingly of StoryCorps—a National Public Radio (NPR) mobile oral history project in the US. In the StoryCorps project, family members team up to interview each other, assisted by oral historians. Each interview is recorded in full and then edited by radio professionals for broadcast, and participants receive a copy of the raw audio recording to take home.

Daniel Meadows: Of course, that's a big media model, I mean taking National Public Radio as being big media. As a big media model it makes sense because it's cheap. Somebody else is doing it for you, somebody else is editing it for you, you've got lots of raw material you can cut up any way you like. So I don't mean that disparagingly because I'm sure they'll do it in an honourable way, but the bottom line is it's a

model that means that you can get lots and lots of stories very cheaply.

The problem with Digital Storytelling is you get few stories very expensively [laughs].

And you know, that's been a big issue for us in rolling Digital Storytelling out. Digital Storytelling is incredibly top-heavy. Here we are, three of us setting up a lab, we've been at it since 9 o'clock this morning, packing up the kit, getting it all ready. Two days cleaning the machines off last week prior to this workshop. We've got two other people running a story circle down in the city where the real work's being done today.

Meadows' discourse is structured by tensions, not only between 'citizens media' and 'big media', but also between the ideologies of commercial popular culture and public service broadcasting. The centralised representative power and top-down economics of 'big media' are seen as problematic; but neither can the general audience be relied upon to choose what is good for them. In this sense, the ethos of *Capture Wales* is in many ways entirely *compatible* with the classic Reithian vision of public service broadcasting that underpinned the institutional design of the BBC, conceived of as a 'social, cultural, educative and moral force' that should entertain, educate, and lead rather than imitate popular taste formations, and that should operate as a practical *critique* of (American) commercial broadcasting (Born, 2005: 27).

In the following dialogue between Meadows and *Capture Wales* team member Gareth Morlais, the problem of lack of support for Digital Storytelling, and other forms of ‘citizens media’, is positioned in relation to both the supply and demand sides of (inauthentic) commercial popular culture:

Gareth Morlais: I’m a bit frustrated that big media hasn’t really embraced this idea of its audiences making its content, so I’m just disappointed about that really even after the years that we’ve been working on one little thing, you’d have thought that there’d be some shift by now.

Daniel Meadows: If a BBC boss is asked to talk up participatory media or citizen’s media (at board level)...Digital Storytelling is talked about as being a flagship project—and yet, you know, a flagship project implies [...] that the money being spent on it is the amount you’d spend on a flagship drama, like *Doctor Who* or something, and the total amount of money spent on Digital Storytelling at the BBC has been each year about the same that they would spend on the salary of a celebrity newscaster.
[...]

Gareth Morlais: I think one of the biggest factors won’t be free content encouraging the broadcasters to show it—I think it will be more of a resistance to showing it because of fear of lack of popularity. There are formats that would lend themselves well to people making their own content, for example in Britain we’ve got things like...makeover type

programs. Why do we always have to have a celebrity anchoring it? Why could they not work with the community, train them in the equipment so that they're actually operating [it], setting the agenda and presenting and the characters, they're finding the real characters because they *know* the real characters of that area. Why isn't there a sort of format that works in the makeover format that's driven not by celebrity but by community members? I would love to see that. Is that naive?

Reflecting a certain amount of disillusionment, not just with the priorities of 'Big Media', but with the extent to which 'ordinary' audiences are interested in the *authentic* stories of their fellow citizens, Meadows replied:

I think it's very attractive and it says a lot of nice things about you but I think it ultimately is naive because, you know, look at it; look at how many people watch Celebrity Big Brother, and even if they don't watch it they're talking about it all the time...

Gareth Morlais: And so the factor of popularity is the one that dictates, I think, more than to the contrary that free content is attractive.

For Meadows, the innovation in Digital Storytelling comes from the fact that one person can produce the whole 'film' on 'the kitchen table' and all 'on one machine', unmediated by 'big media', and with an elegant result.

Interviewer: So it's not so much what you see on screen as how it got there?

Daniel Meadows: Well, I think what you see on screen as well, you

know, it's short, it's in the first person, it doesn't over-use special effects, it has its own aesthetic which is a bit clumsy, you know, what I'd call a "scrapbook aesthetic"...but it's such an elegant thing. I mean that day I came across [Dana Atchley's] 'Next Exit' for the first time was magic, to see that stuff, for me, I mean it's all old now, we think "oh, that was then", but I mean it was fantastic, it was groundbreaking that you could make that in a computer on your kitchen table. Whereas previously you had to get a media corporation to help you make something like that. And so it is a form, yeah. It was a completely new media form...because a form isn't just 'the aesthetic' that builds it, it's also the way in which it's made and in which other people can learn to make it.

However, this ideal of autonomy is tempered, not only by the 'teaching' function of the Digital Storytelling workshop process, but also by the fact that many, if not most Digital Storytelling programs are situated within larger institutions or organisations. In practice, almost all digital stories are produced in resource-intensive workshops staffed by several trainers and funded by institutions with particular interests that need to be balanced with the 'pure' desire for ordinary people to make their own media.

As a cultural form, Digital Storytelling is strongly characterised by the ethic of authenticity; most obviously, through the prominence of individual biographical narratives and the self-representation of social identity. Participants are encouraged to represent themselves 'as they are', using a first-person narrative, avoiding

abstraction, and with a minimum of material sourced from popular culture. The *Capture Wales* team takes a direct role in the construction of authenticity, both through the training process—where participants are literally *taught* what a ‘good story’ is—and the curation of stories on the website, where they are collated into thematic categories and framed within the organising discourse of a socially diverse ‘Welshness’.

The ethics and aesthetics of Digital Storytelling are closely related, and in the case of *Capture Wales*, are both representations of the tensions between the idea of ‘grassroots’ or citizens’ media, and the provider ideologies that structure the context of practice. Meadows stressed the importance of ‘elegance’ as an aesthetic ideal several times during our various conversations. Elegance means the achievement of high production values that are compatible with the scrapbook aesthetic (and therefore remain authentic), constituted via textual features such as an evenly paced narrative, smooth transitions, muted or subtle effects (unless more dramatic effects are compellingly motivated by the narrative), consistent colour and ‘lighting’ in the imagery, and a clear, full-bodied sound recording. However none of these things are particularly easy to achieve without a high level of very specific cultural competencies, which form part of the bourgeois *habitus* and are otherwise known as ‘good taste’. The ‘authenticity’ in a digital story comes from the ‘grain of the voice’ of the participant, the content of the story sourced from the participant’s life, and the colloquial manner of its expression. But, building on the authentic ‘voice’, the *form* of the digital story—constituted via the writing, planning, editing, and technical production of the film—is indeed shaped towards elegance and not the chaotic,

kitsch or raucous qualities of the street or lowbrow vernacular.

Typically, the trainers listen to each participant read their scripts aloud, and offer suggestions for improvement. In the *Capture Wales* workshop that I observed, the trainer leading this process emphasised the creation of an ‘arced narrative’ characterised by development and progression, and avoiding repetition, ultimately aiming to resolve ambiguity and arrive at a ‘punchline’. During this process the other participants smiled, nodded and offered supportive comments to each other but were not asked directly for their opinions, however the other trainers offered comments and suggestions at various points. The participants were explicitly encouraged to retain authentic colloquial expressions and intonation in their scripts and performances, being praised when they sounded ‘like themselves’ or their scripts were ‘like the stories you tell in the pub’. The participants were told that this approach gives ‘us insight into a particular culture’ by drawing on concrete, lived experiences expressed in an authentic way. Participants who attempt to ‘break’ the form by using poetry or by creating an ‘objective’, documentary-style digital story, rather than viewing the world through their ‘unique’ individual personal life history, are gently discouraged from doing so. Shared cultural memories are to be related through the lens of personal, individual experience. For example, one participant was telling the story of how he had watched the moon landing on television as a child, and was encouraged to use his own recollections and images rather than attempting to make ‘bad television’ by using the ‘generic’ shared image of Neil Armstrong on

the moon.³⁹ The resulting story, Gary Bevan’s ‘Try Counting All Those Stars’ evokes the remembered *experience* of seeing Sputnik fly overhead and the moon landing on television, rather than merely reproducing the by now clichéd image of Neil Armstrong setting foot on the moon that, in mass media representations, metonymically stands in for the moon landing as a shared cultural event.⁴⁰

Paddy McNally’s story, ‘A Little Misunderstanding’, which was produced at the Caerphilly train-the-trainers workshop I observed, is a paradigmatic example of the ways in which digital stories produced by this method are effective remediations of vernacular storytelling. His story, illustrated with a combination of existing snapshots and scene-setting fictional images, is a typical example of the kind of story built around a humorous anecdote, rehearsed and perfected through multiple retellings in social situations such as the pub. The transcript, rich with vernacular language and common experience, clearly demonstrates the way such stories follow the naturalised ‘rules’ of humorous vernacular storytelling, in this case building to a ‘punchline’ that is made possible by controlled ambiguity, the full knowledge of which is shared by the audience:

“Dad, d’you know in September...can I have piano lessons in school?”

asked our nine-year-old daughter, Sophie.

“Yeah, of course you can love”, I replied. By a massive stroke of luck,

³⁹ There are also compelling logistical reasons for this emphasis on self-created content—most important among which is the required compliance with copyright law, which becomes even more crucial in the context of potential broadcast by the BBC.

⁴⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales/background/gary-bevan.shtml>

two days later, Claire's auntie offered us an old organ she was throwing out.

Claire and me had been together for years but we finally decided to get married.

My stag night was soon upon me so off we went. As part of a long-standing tradition I was dumped naked off the bus 20 miles from home. However in the mayhem, I don't know how but I received an injury to my privates, bruised and swollen it was.

With just 3 days before the wedding a night was arranged so I could meet all Claire's family before the big day, we were meeting in a pub for a meal and some drinks.

Being a bit of a tight arse I was the last to enter the pub where they were all waiting. While standing at the bar one of Claire's uncles shouted from the other side of the pub, "Paddy boy, how's the organ?" I was a little surprised because he never struck me as the crude type.

"Alright ", I shouted back, "it's still a bit sore but the swelling has gone down."

He looked at me a little confused... but then continued, "Has Claire played a tune on it yet?"

This really surprised me. "No" I shouted back. Then, grabbing my groin and thrusting my pelvis, "But she's going to on the wedding night!"

By this time the whole pub was looking at me opened mouthed and I

could feel my face going red.

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

I realised there had been a terrible misunderstanding and quickly made my exit to the Men’s Room.

I can just imagine what they must of been thinking... “Is she really marrying him”.

On the *Capture Wales* website, the digital stories made available for streaming are organised into five thematic categories: Challenge, Community, Family, Memory, Passion; and in addition the website features an interactive map allowing visitors to browse the stories by geographic location. Taken as a whole, the digital stories on the *Capture Wales* website generally follow the norms of vernacular storytelling, which are ‘patterned and formulaic’ (Abrahams, 2005: 74) and yet taken individually the stories are very far from being the same *because* of their vernacularity—which, as I discussed in Chapter 2, entails concrete specificity as well as ordinariness.

Technology and New Media Literacy

In *Capture Wales*, the discourses around technology and new media literacy articulate to the balance between authentic self-expression and the guidance of participants towards elegant and tasteful production values discussed above.

Meadows expressed his idea of the ideal technological situation in the statement, “I would love us just to have one Digital Storytelling tool that everybody uses”. But this can only ever remain an ideal, given the variability of platforms, hardware setups, and available software outside the controlled environment of the *Capture*

Wales workshop. The way the technological environment is set up for workshops, and the ways in which participants are guided carefully step-by-step through the production process, represents a compromise between the fact that the technology is not necessarily ‘easy’ to use effectively, especially for those using a computer for the first time, and yet it is important that all the participants *do* use it to produce their digital stories, while minimising the chaos that can ensue from a non-uniform setup.

The *Capture Wales* project had recently switched from IBM-compatible PCs, running Adobe Photoshop and Premiere, to Macintosh computers running Adobe Photoshop and iMovie. The project has its own portable Digital Storytelling lab, which in addition to Mac Minis, monitors, keyboards and mice, includes a portable sound booth and audio recording equipment, as well as digital still and video cameras. On the first ‘production’ day of the workshop I observed in Caerphilly, Daniel, Gareth and Carwen spend the morning setting up the ‘lab’ in the function room; the result is equidistant, carefully arranged rows of Mac minis, monitors, mice and keyboards on tables covered in black cloth, with carefully taped down leads, a data projector, and speakers so that the participants can follow along with Meadows as he demonstrates each step of the photo editing and film assembly process. Each of the Mac Minis is pre-configured so that only the applications necessary for Digital Storytelling are visible. On the desktop is the BBC *Capture Wales* logo and one folder into which the digital assets for each participant’s digital story will be saved and stored. In *Capture Wales* workshops, both the teaching and execution of the computer-based elements of the production process take place in a ‘classroom’ environment, with Meadows standing at the back of the room, demonstrating with the aid of a data projector and screen, and participants following along with what

they see on the screen, and then going on to complete the relevant step in their own stories. Each phase of the production process is given a discrete and exclusive time frame, so that nobody is to get ahead or behind. Examples of 'best practice' (either the trainers' own stories or those produced in prior workshops) are threaded throughout the teaching process, schooling the participants in the aesthetics of the form as much as in the technical side of production.

There is a particular construction of usability in interface design, and a particular perspective on computer literacy that run through Meadows' discourse and the embedded practices of *Capture Wales*. This construction of literacy runs counter to most 'official' ideas about the competencies individual users need to master in order to use a computer, and indeed the *purpose* of computer literacy. In the following explanation of why he thinks the Graphical User Interface (GUI) and a mouse are the easiest way 'into' computing for most beginners, Meadows expresses a vision of computer literacy that serves creative communication, rather than the instrumental purposes of vocational 'functional' literacy:

If you were at the start with people who'd never done computing before...if you were to start with the idea that it was a multimedia machine that could do anything, that would be a lot more interesting, and probably they'd be quicker into understanding what a computer could do than by trying to put them through the European driving license or

whatever it's called,⁴¹ you know, this thing which basically teaches you how to use Bill Gates' kit! As if Bill Gates' kit is some kind of standard that everyone has to get used to...which it plainly is if you want to have a *job*. But if you want to understand the multimedia capabilities of computing in the 21st century, the European driving license is like starting off handicapped, isn't it? Because it's saying to you the only way in is through a keyboard.

Meadows often repeats the following quote from Ivan Illich's (1973) *Tools for Conviviality*, which he also reproduces in bold text on his personal website:

Tools are intrinsic to social relationships. An individual relates himself in action to his society through the use of tools that he actively masters, or by which he is passively acted upon. To the degree that he masters his tools he can invest the world with his meaning; to the degree that he is mastered by his tools, the shape of the tool determines his own self-image. Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision. (Illich, 1973: 22)

⁴¹ The European Computer Driving License is a qualification awarded after candidates have completed a course designed to develop basic computer literacy, clearly with occupational skills in mind. The seven modules in the syllabus are: 'basic concepts of IT', 'using the computer and managing files' (in Microsoft Windows), 'word processing' (Microsoft Word), 'spreadsheets' (Microsoft Excel), 'database' (Microsoft Access), 'presentation' (Microsoft Powerpoint), and 'information and communication' (email and Internet).

By contrast, for Meadows, vocational or instrumental literacy—for example, teaching people how to construct an Excel spreadsheet—runs counter to humanistic models of technological literacy:

To shackle people up with making graphs and building [a spreadsheet]...when they could be telling a story! The thing that they *know* how to do...everybody tells stories, everybody knows how to tell a story...the thing you *know* how to do you have to *stop* doing and you have to rethink the world to fit into Bill Gates' horrible little tin shack, and just when you've got used to a piece of software, a bit of plastic rubbish, they—he goes and changes it on you! So you've just got used to using, you know, Word or something in its 2000 configuration and suddenly it comes up and it looks completely different! It's designed to make you constantly upset with it. And that is my experience of working with students, that—in the early days of computing—was that I've never heard so much swearing. You know, because you're sitting at the screen and everyone's going "Why isn't this f-ing b-ing damn thing working?" And it's not a convivial tool, it just isn't, and we have to start with computers being convivial tools. So my take on the whole thing would be: Forget Office, forget anything that only allows you into the computer through the keyboard, and think about what you do anyway that the computer can help you do.

This statement speaks directly to the tensions between 'usability' and 'hackability' that I have established as a key problematic in the relationship between technological

literacy and vernacular creativity. In Illich's description of 'convivial' tools as 'those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision' (1973: 22), there is the implication at least that technologies have intrinsic affordances that either enable or repress expansive possibilities for communication. In Illich's assertion that each user can 'master' (or, malevolently, 'be mastered by') his tools, lies the ethos of technological mastery and the principle of hackability—that technologies, whether complex or simple, should be malleable and open to forms of manipulation that serve humanistic goals. In Meadows' discourse, however, these tensions are resolved by creating conditions of maximum technological transparency. Both in the call to 'think about what you do anyway that the computer can help you do' and in practice, technology *as* technology is disarticulated from creative practice. Computers and software are, ideally, transparent 'tools' that can be used to self-mediate the most 'ordinary' form of vernacular creativity—everyday storytelling. Rather than being demystified, computers and software are made to appear as simple and usable as possible through tight control over participants' access to them in the workshops, and they are discursively 'softened' through the mode of instruction that structures the entire workshop process. This represents a specific choice about how the tensions between 'usability' and 'hackability' should be resolved that situates cultural agency at the interface between the individual participants and the trainers, rather than getting 'under the hood' of the computer. Indeed, in another part of our conversation, Meadows stated that Digital Storytelling participants were 'drivers', and 'not mechanics'.

4. QUT Digital Storytelling Projects

Introduction

Whereas Daniel Meadows' work with *Capture Wales* is positioned as the articulation of a particular ideology of public service broadcasting with a particular construction of community (Thumim, 2006), in the two research projects with which I was involved at QUT, the practice of Digital Storytelling was positioned between the ideologies and methodologies of *Capture Wales* and the specific aims and contexts of each of the projects. As discussed above, the BBC *Capture Wales* program is staffed by a team including media, drama and writing professionals, and the everyday modes of cultural production and aesthetics of vernacular creativity are articulated with the overarching aesthetics and modes of cultural production of broadcast media, or 'big media' as Meadows himself calls it. Although closely based on the BBC *Capture Wales* model, in the two QUT projects within which I conducted my research for this study, the facilitators (including myself) were not predominantly media professionals, but rather researchers, writers, historians, and amateur creative producers familiar with the technologies involved. As was the case with *Capture Wales*, the practice of Digital Storytelling was inflected in particular ways that reference both the philosophies of the trainers and the fact that the Digital Storytelling workshops were embedded within larger research projects that had particular concerns in addition to everyday cultural participation—participatory public history, in the case of the KGUV *Sharing Stories* project; and youth, regionality and the creative uses of online networks, in the case of the Youth Internet Radio Network project.

Youth Internet Radio Network Project (YIRN)

The Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) was an Australian Research Council funded research project led by John Hartley and Greg Hearn that aimed to engage young people in an investigation of how information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be used for interaction, creativity, and innovation. The research project merged design, content creation, policy analysis and ethnographic methods (Hartley et al., 2003). YIRN created partnerships with urban, regional, and indigenous communities at ten different sites around Queensland and undertook Digital Storytelling workshops at each of these sites (Notley & Tacchi, 2005). The fifty-one Digital Stories produced at these workshops have been included with other content young people produce on a streaming website⁴² which launched into beta early in 2006. Between June and November 2004 I participated as a co-facilitator and researcher at the YIRN Digital Storytelling workshops at Zillmere, Fortitude Valley, Carole Park and Ipswich, however in this thesis I will discuss the Fortitude Valley and Ipswich workshops in most detail.

Both workshops followed the *Capture Wales* model in terms of the schedule and mode of instruction: the workshops began with a story circle and script development, moving through photo capture, editing, and video assembly in order. The lead facilitator⁴³ would demonstrate using a data projector and screen, and there was usually a team of two or three facilitators at each workshop, so that the participants

⁴² <http://www.sticky.net.au>

⁴³ In the YIRN workshops, the lead facilitator was Tanya Notley, who was both the Research Associate on the project and a PhD student researching digital inclusion issues in underprivileged areas.

had hands-on assistance as they worked through the script-writing, image capture, assembly and editing process. But because the YIRN workshops were conducted on site at schools or youth centres in whatever space the host institution could allocate for the 5-day workshop period, the technological aspects of the workshops, some of the timetabling, and the layout of the spaces in which we worked were largely beyond the control of the production team; necessitating a certain level of flexibility and the acceptance of unpredictability, particularly in moving through the process of the participants actually assembling their stories.

The Fortitude Valley workshop was held at a Visible Ink Space, provided through a Brisbane City Council Youth Strategy initiative that aims to increase visibility and civic participation for young people (Brisbane City Council, 2004a). Fortitude Valley is close to the city centre and is a formerly run-down semi-industrial urban area that is now Brisbane's most visible and publicly celebrated entertainment, independent music and leisure precinct. Accordingly, the range of activities at Visible Ink in Fortitude Valley are focused on DIY cultural entrepreneurship, in contrast to the focus on social inclusion issues at Visible Ink Zillmere.⁴⁴ The space includes a computer room, a resource library, and two meeting rooms, and attracts users mainly in the 16-25 year old age group. It is also the organising space for the

⁴⁴ Zillmere is a northern suburb of Brisbane approximately 20 minutes drive from the city centre. Zillmere is considered to be in a socio-economically disadvantaged area in policy terms (FaCSIA, 2006) and the space is assigned a community development worker to assist in addressing social/economic issues. By contrast, according to the Brisbane City Council website (Brisbane City Council, 2004b), The Valley Space 'provides practical support and development for local young entrepreneurs'. Cited examples include a youth theatre company, a zine distribution service, a music compilation and promo business, a film making and editing business, and a dance company.

Straight Out Of Brisbane (Youth) Festival. As the space's computer lab was occupied by other users of the Visible Ink Space at the time, the production of the digital stories was carried out using laptops in one of the meeting rooms, and the voiceovers were recorded using a laptop and microphone in an office upstairs.

The Ipswich workshop was held in a computer lab at St. Edmunds High School, a Catholic boys' school, in partnership with the Lead On program, and included girls from St. Mary's High School, which is the 'sister' school of St. Edmunds.⁴⁵ The production activities were carried out in a computer lab that was configured to comply with IT policies of the school—which, for example, prevented the installation of software or drivers and blocked students from saving files to the hard drive. These limitations required a series of compromises and technical work-arounds, such as working with versions of software that were incompatible with the manual we had created. The voiceovers were recorded using a laptop and an external soundcard in the music room, pausing every time there was a break between classes to avoid the noise of hundreds of students moving between classes or playing basketball on the court just outside the room.

Many of the digital stories produced by young people in the YIRN workshops are passionate in their evocation of enthusiasms for their own existing everyday creative practice. This is especially true in the case of two of the participants in the Fortitude

⁴⁵ Lead On Australia is a 'community enhancement model (or community enterprise structure) designed to enable young people to engage and become involved in real life business and community activities in communities across Australia.' The organization is funded by the Bendigo Bank as well as via government sources.

Valley workshop, who were already familiar with media production in various ways, and whose career focus was very much in alignment with media production prior to the workshop. Kate was an aspiring radio/music journalist with a regular spot at 4ZZZ, a local community radio station. Kate's digital story narrated her experience of a 'rock moment'—it describes an epiphany she experienced as a fan at a rock concert that inspired her to pursue music journalism as a career.

Richard was a design major at a local university. His story was about his move from Dalby, a rural town in southern Queensland, which he describes as 'flat' and boring, to the relatively urban city of Brisbane, and his eventual realisation that individual perspectives on place were more important than the objective features of the place itself. Richard's digital story featured a continuous scrolling effect over a visual montage of photographs and hand-drawn illustrative and design elements, and throughout the workshop he was most focused on using Digital Storytelling as a vehicle to showcase his creative work.

In the Ipswich workshop, Nefhieren⁴⁶ brought along her journal to show the group, and from the first day was most interested in talking about her interests in poetry, writing and drawing. At the beginning her digital story *Das Tagebuch*, while a series of still photographs of her flipping through the pages appear on screen, Nefhieren says, "I started my journal sometime this year or last year... It was started with pictures I liked and lyrics from songs and poems or basically anything that caught my eyes." As she explains, from these beginnings as a scrapbook, the journal

⁴⁶ Nefhieren's digital story is accessible online at:
http://www.sticky.net.au/Members/nefhieren/nefhieren_full-017_256k.mov/view

became a mixture of re-versioned popular culture—written-out song lyrics, copied-out anime drawings—with original drawings, literature and poetry (as well as a transcription of an Edgar Allen Poe poem). It was the everyday practice of journaling, she says, that allowed her to explore her passion for writing and to be recently published in a local paper.

In the young people’s stories produced in YIRN workshops the distinction between ‘citizenship’ and ‘consumption’ is difficult to draw. Indeed, there are many examples of the ways in which a sense of place, or ideas about the ethics of the ‘good life’ are intertwined with everyday popular culture and consumption. For example, in his story *Mortality*, fourteen-year-old Nathan⁴⁷ explains how computer games, eagles, and music combine to inspire him in his attempts to develop a philosophy about how to live a good life in the face of the inevitability of death. He opens by paraphrasing a quote from William Knox’s poem ‘Mortality’ that, Nathan says, he found on a trading card from the game *Magic: The Gathering*:

A flash of the lightning, a break of the wave –

He passes from life to his rest in the grave.

Nathan goes on to deliver his interpretation of the poem, saying:

In ten years after death who will remember who you are and what you were like? There’ll be nothing left of you but the buildings and tombstones that you have left in your wake just to prove that you did

⁴⁷ Nathan’s digital story is accessible online at:
http://www.sticky.net.au/Members/nathan/nathan_collins_final_256k.mov/view

exist.

The solution, according to Nathan, is to make the most of the time we have, engaging with the rich resources of popular culture that engage and inspire us.

Kelvin Grove Urban Village—*Sharing Stories*

The Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) is a 16-hectare inner-city redevelopment project that is a joint venture of the Queensland Department of Housing and Queensland University of Technology. The KGUV is an area at the edge of the CBD that includes the QUT Kelvin Grove Campus, Kelvin Grove High School, the site of a former military barracks and a retirement home, as well as new residential and commercial developments. The multi-art form public history project *Sharing Stories* led by Philip Nielsen and Helen Klaebe from 2004-2006, funded by the Department of Housing, was part of a strategy to build a sense of community identity and inclusiveness in the development. The project has produced two books representing the history of the area from first settlement, and has launched a website which includes community oral history, visual artworks and digital stories. Digital Storytelling was the principal methodology for enabling direct public participation in the project. The digital stories produced in the workshops were launched at a public screening and subsequently made available on the KGUV *Sharing Stories* website (Klaebe & Foth, 2006; Klaebe, 2006).⁴⁸

The first workshop for the KGUV *Sharing Stories* project was held in December 2004 in a computer lab on the Creative Industries Precinct at QUT, facilitated by a

⁴⁸ See <http://www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/sharing/>

three-person team that I coordinated,⁴⁹ and with the additional support of two young people who volunteered to help the older participants to use the computers. As project manager and the public historian working on the project, Helen Klaebe selected the participants from among those with whom she had been working on the oral history component of the project. It was also an intergenerational and cross-institutional workshop: included among the participants were a student from the local high school, a student from the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT, as well as Klaebe herself and Philip Nielsen, director of the Creative Writing program at QUT.

Table 3: Participants at first KGUV *Sharing Stories* workshop

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
Minna Brennan	80s	F	Retired
Graham Jenkinson	80s	M	Retired
Peter Newland	50s	M	Self employed
Robert Hardingham	60s	M	Retired
Qinglin (Leila) Wu	20s	F	Postgraduate student
Caitlyn Palmer-Bright	16	F	Secondary school student
Philip Nielsen	50s	M	Professor of Creative Writing, QUT
Helen Klaebe	40s	F	Project manager, <i>Sharing Stories</i>

In this first workshop, the intention was to adhere as closely as possible to the model that had been taught to a group of QUT researchers by Daniel Meadows in the 2004 ‘train-the-trainers’ workshop, and which had been used successfully, with minor

⁴⁹ The other two members of the team were Tanya Notley and Mat Kesting.

adaptations, in the Youth Internet Radio Network project discussed above. However, with the exception of Leila Wu, who was a postgraduate student in communication design in the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT, as well as Helen Klæbe and Philip Nielsen, who were leading the project, it quickly became apparent that the participants' primary goal in participating in the workshop was to contribute to a public history project rather than to 'express' themselves or to share their life experiences. While the participants enthusiastically participated in the workshop at a social level, they did not represent themselves as being especially interested in becoming filmmakers or digital creative producers. This subtle difference between the goals of these participants and those who had taken part in the YIRN workshops meant that the process had to be quickly and significantly adapted, although the departures from the 'default' (*Capture Wales*) model were much more dramatic in the second workshop than the first.

In the first workshop, the activities that form part of the Story Circle day—the 'games' designed to lower the barriers to collaboration and trust, as well as to encourage and reward 'self-expression'—were met with a polite but lukewarm reception by the participants. However, once the conversation turned to what was clearly perceived as the 'real business' of the workshop—the history of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village area—the atmosphere became charged with enthusiasm. Most significantly, once the 'production' part of the workshop began, the top-down, step-by-step 'teaching' of the participants how to use the software was abandoned in favour of a more collaborative and ad hoc approach, with older participants who were reluctant to use computers teamed up one-on-one with trainers or younger volunteers.



Figure 13: KGUV *Sharing Stories* Workshop 2004

The second workshop for the KGUV *Sharing Stories* project was held in early 2006. Helen Klaebe and I facilitated the workshop with the help of Fiona Crawford (the research assistant on the *Sharing Stories* project) and Bryan Crawford (a freelance video producer and editor). This workshop was less intergenerational than the first, involving mostly older participants who were either current or past residents of the Kelvin Grove area (see Table 4 below). We deliberately chose to depart from the ‘*Capture Wales*’ workshop model, working on the assumption based on reflection after the first workshop, that for these participants, the motivation to make digital stories as part of this project was not primarily ‘creative’, but rather to do with the preservation of memory, social interaction and the sharing of knowledge. Additionally, several participants had health and literacy difficulties that made it impossible for the workshop to proceed in strictly the ‘usual’ way. For example, one

of the participants had Parkinson's Disease, another very poor eyesight, and another had never learned to read and write beyond the most basic level.

Table 4: Participants at second KGUV *Sharing Stories* workshop

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
Norma Mills	70s	F	Retired
Nigel Stevens	70s	M	Retired
John Duncan	70s	M	Retired
Rex Kirkham	70s	M	Retired
Ann Staples	60s	F	Retired
Judith Cox	50s	F	Not employed
Teresa Mircovich	80s	F	Full-time carer
Ailsa McConnell	80s	F	Retired
Stephen Pincus	40s	M	KGUV Project manager (QUT)
Penny Somerville	30s	F	KGUV Project manager (Qld Government Dept. of Housing)

Accordingly, we experimented in several significant ways with the received model of Digital Storytelling. Three group workshop days were held, where the focus was placed on getting all the participants together to share their stories, talk about their memories of the KGUV site, and ensure that they all participated in the storyboarding of their individual digital stories and made or were consulted on decisions around the selection and ordering of images to illustrate the scripts. But the most significant departure from the ideal model of Digital Storytelling lies in the fact that it was eventually the production team, and not the participants, who assembled the images and sound. Some of the stories were also unscripted. This meant that the

outcome of the Story Circle process for some participants was something like an interview schedule—a roadmap for a chat—rather than a script that they then read out aloud. These interviews or conversations were recorded, and the resultant audio files (in some cases, 20 minutes in length) were edited down to two-minute voiceovers.

There were two screenings of the digital stories. The first, for participants and their family members only, was part of the workshop ‘wrap up’ day, which also included a focus group discussion. The second screening was held as part of the public launch of the *Sharing Stories* exhibition, and it was treated as a major event by the participants. Many of them dressed up and even had their hair done especially for the occasion, and most of them brought several friends and family members as guests. The participants-only screening and focus group were held at the conclusion of the workshop.



Figure 14: KGUV *Sharing Stories* Workshop 2006

The focus group discussion was open-ended, but the following schedule of topics was observed:

1. What did you think of the stories? Which ones did you like, and why?
2. What did you think of what we did with yours? (Generally, as well as any specific problems, things we need to change about each story)
3. Do you feel like you still had control over your stories even though we put them together?
4. Do you wish you had been able to learn to make the stories yourselves? (i.e. using the computers, scanners, video editing, etc) Or would you like to learn in the future?

5. What did you think about the workshop process?

There was strong agreement in the focus group about the benefits of participating in the Digital Storytelling workshop. The discussion of benefits had two main themes. First, the participants were enthusiastic about the preservation of memories in a form that can be easily passed on to others (mainly in the family) and that would be appealing to audiences. For example, Stephen told us that he saw the digital story form as a good substitute for his 'red book' of photos, that he said friends and family members tend to 'complain about' rather than engage with when he brings it out to show them. Nigel said he could see Digital Storytelling being very useful in his family, as his children were 'at him' and his wife to write down stories about their life histories. Norma also focused on the potential for the preservation of family memories, lamenting the difficulties of reconstructing history when artefacts have been lost and little has been written down. The participants also discussed the benefits of being able to access new perspectives on a shared history, which led in turn to more sharing of memories and stories. Whenever the conversation was not explicitly being directed elsewhere, it turned to history—family trees, arguments about the exact locations of buildings in the area at a particular time, and additional memories and stories stimulated by the digital stories on screen. This enthusiasm around sharing and comparing historical information and memories was the most marked dynamic of social interaction across all three of the group sessions at the workshop.

The second primary theme clustered around social interaction, community engagement, and encounters with difference. For example, following the screening of Teresa Mircovich's story, which narrates her journey with a young family from a refugee camp in Italy to her eventual home in Kelvin Grove, the other participants remarked that hearing about the 'Italian immigration' experience was 'interesting'. This led to a discussion about how the names of Southern European immigrants were often Anglicised upon settling in Australia, and then to the significance of the connotations of Scottish, Irish and English names in the interwar and postwar period; sharing memories of the cultural clash between Protestants and Catholics, and in turn to stories about prejudices against 'coloured people' in Brisbane.

In evaluating the digital stories and the way we had edited them, the participants were overwhelmingly concerned with assessing the historical accuracy of the texts that had been produced. In some cases, participants asked us to change or add to their stories to reflect this concern with accuracy. In keeping with the idea of authoring micro-histories rather than 'entertainment', some participants insisted on strictly referential relationships between images and sound. For example, at one point in Nigel's story about his experience of serving in the National Service, the voice-over refers to post-training, but the photograph on the screen is of a gun tripod that was only used in training, and he asked us to superimpose text over the image to acknowledge this fact. The nature of the participants' comments and concerns about individual stories reinforced my intuition that, in community contexts like the KGUV, as opposed to the BBC *Capture Wales* program, the participants are making stories for knowledgeable peers and their own families, not for the public. The

public ‘out there’ is an afterthought or added bonus, despite the knowledge that the digital stories would eventually be viewed by a much wider audience, at the launch and on the KGUV *Sharing Stories* website.

History, whether personal or public, was the unifying theme not only in the focus group discussion, but throughout *both* of the KGUV *Sharing Stories* workshops: the participants rarely framed their participation or the process as a whole in relation to the discourse of ‘creativity’.⁵⁰ This is not surprising, given the project’s emphasis on sharing stories and its de-emphasis of the most superficially obvious ‘production’ practices—photographic and video editing. However it is significant for two reasons, the first of which is that it seems that ‘natural’ storytelling, and even scriptwriting and storyboarding, were seen as less creative by the participants than the computer-based ‘production’ of multimedia artefacts. The second important aspect of this ‘non-creative’ framing of the second workshop is that it shows how much what Digital Storytelling is *about and for* is determined by the material and discursive contexts in which it is framed and practiced—if Digital Storytelling is framed as a creative practice, as it was in the YIRN workshops, then the participants will focus on their own creative practice in their stories and in their discourse about the Digital Storytelling process; if it is framed as a form of oral history, then the participants will focus on their role as vernacular historians.

⁵⁰ Indeed, the concept of ‘creativity’, while implicitly framed as a core human attribute in the US Center for Digital Storytelling model, is also notably absent from the discourse surrounding *Capture Wales*.

All but one of the participants said repeatedly that they were more than happy for the production team to do the scanning and editing—indeed, several literally threw up their hands and said that they ‘didn’t want to know’ about computers; the two younger participants (whose participation was on a professional basis as they were involved with the KGUV development) said that they felt capable of learning the technical aspects of Digital Storytelling, but were not interested in doing so, mainly for reasons of time pressure. In fact, Helen Klæbe (2006) has noted that some of the participants were reluctant to be involved until she promised them that they would not need to learn to use a computer in order to participate in the workshop. This is precisely the kind of situation to which the *Capture Wales* project is a direct response: how to assist people for whom the creative use of digital technologies is not part of everyday life to take advantage of the participatory potential of digital culture? While the solution for *Capture Wales* is to tightly control and simplify the technology as much as possible, and to guide the participants through the use of it step by step, the KGUV *Sharing Stories* solution was, in effect, to remove technology from the equation. As well as the obvious question of technological agency, this clearly raises questions of authorship—to what extent are the digital stories published under the names of the participants really ‘theirs’?

While waiting for the participants-only screening to begin, the same levels of anxiety, concern and excitement about how the stories would be received by the audience were as apparent as they had been at the conclusion of all the other, more ‘hands-on’ workshops in which I was involved. This suggests that, according to the perceptions of the participants, the responsibilities and emotional risks of *authorship* can be separated from responsibility for ‘production’. That is, the stories were no

less ‘theirs’ in an affective sense than they would have been if they had physically assembled all of the digital elements, either entirely by themselves or with the assistance of the facilitators. If nothing else, Digital Storytelling can create a sense of one’s biography as unique and important, as well as relevant to others. However, there are often unintended consequences for cultural citizenship that extend beyond individual expression or psychological wellbeing. The three following examples from the KGUV *Sharing Stories* project demonstrate how Digital Storytelling can work in the service of cultural inclusion, even without the individual participants mastering the technologies involved.

Minna Brennan, at 86 years old, was one of the most senior participants in the KGUV Sharing Stories project. Minna came along to the workshop with several exercise books filled with neatly hand-written histories of the Kelvin Grove Infant’s School from her point of view as a teacher during the Second World War – histories that only close family members and fellow residents of her retirement home had seen before. At the conclusion of the workshop, where she completed a digital story that interwove these wartime ‘institutional’ memories with the story of her then-nascent romance with her husband, I asked Minna what she thought of the workshop process and her story. She said, with a mixture of great pride and self-deprecating humour, ‘I never thought I’d be a storyteller.’

Minna’s story is now publicly available online along with the others created in that workshop on the KGUV Sharing Stories website, where the digital stories attract significantly higher traffic than the other photographs, stories, and artworks housed there. However, it is important to note the ways in which digital stories circulate

among micro-publics as well, and the consequences that can result. Minna, who lives in a local retirement home, reported to project leader Helen Klaebe that the staff and other residents treated her ‘differently’ following a screening of her story at the retirement home. She reported receiving comments from staff and residents such as, “Make way for the movie star!” as she passed through the common areas of the retirement home, and that after seeing her digital story, her children were more interested than they had been previously in reading the diaries she had kept since she was in her teens and from which the material for her digital story was drawn (Klaebe, 2006).

Another participant, Graham Jenkinson, now in his 80s, was recognised in 1992 as ‘Queenslander of the Year’ for his dedication to community work in his local regional district, however old age and his consequent relocation prevented him from continuing to engage in community activities to the extent he previously had. Graham was invited to participate in the KGUV *Sharing Stories* project and chose to make a digital story featuring personal photographs of a previously undocumented Japanese POW holding area. While he did not physically use the computer to assemble his story, he had read the Digital Storytelling manual, written the script and storyboard, and selected the images and music. When it was time to assemble all the digital elements in the video editing application, Graham sat beside one of the trainers in front of the computer monitor, for the most part controlling and directing the process by pointing at the screen and giving verbal instructions or collaboratively weighing up particular editing choices, but without physically touching the mouse or keyboard. Graham’s story has attracted great interest from history groups and the wider community since it featured online. Since then, Graham has co-presented

walking history tours of the Kelvin Grove Urban Village site, publicly addressed his retirement village and spoken to school groups around Anzac and Remembrance Day (Klaebe, 2006).

Another participant, Teresa Mircovich, was the full-time carer of her invalid partner Igor. Both had come to Australia as refugees from an Italian internment camp after World War Two. Teresa's digital story was based on an extended interview recorded directly to a laptop over tea and cake in her kitchen. We selected the appropriate images for the story via a conversation over the photo album, resulting in a collaborative storyboarding process. The digital assembly was undertaken entirely by the production team back at QUT, in consultation with Teresa. Additionally, we held a private 'screening' in her loungeroom as Teresa was unable to attend the initial participants-only screening and focus group because of her responsibilities as primary carer for her husband. When we showed her the completed story, Teresa watched it once and immediately phoned her neighbours, asking them to come over and watch it too. Teresa and her son were able to attend the public screening at the Creative Industries Precinct, which is part of the KGUV, and once again her neighbours came along to support her.

As part of the process of making Teresa's digital story, we discovered that in 1987, her husband Igor had begun producing *El Zaratín*, a newsletter for the former Italian residents of his hometown Zara (the former capital of Dalmatia, now Zadar) because, in his words, he "wanted to keep all the people together", and to "keep the past in the present". *El Zaratín* was distributed by post to some of the 43,000 former members of Zara who left the city for Italy as refugees after Zara's incorporation into

Yugoslavia (now Croatia) at the conclusion of the Second World War. These citizens and their families are now scattered around the globe, having settled via post-war immigration programs in Austria, Germany, Canada, Italy, and Australia. Igor explained the peer-to-peer structure of the diasporic communication network, building up over time through the brokerage of contacts through the publication, and said that he had met ‘lots of new friends’ through the newsletter and had attended a number of reunions. The diasporic community supported the newsletter with subscriptions and by contributing their own news, photographs, or historical material which Igor, as editor, incorporated into the publication, using a typewriter, photocopier, glue and scissors, with some assistance from his son, who had a photocopier at work⁵¹. It was, in effect, a zine, but one that operated outside the subcultural aesthetic and political economy of ‘zine culture’. In the early 1990s, Igor learned to use a computer specifically for the purposes of making production of *El Zaratín* easier. Due to a stroke more than ten years ago, when in his 70s, Igor was forced to cease publication of the zine. Teresa’s and Igor’s son brought his mother to the public screening of her digital story and said afterwards that he intends to write to the former readers of *El Zaratín* to let them know the web address for her digital story, believing it would be an opportunity to contribute to the collective memory of the former residents of *Zara* who had subscribed to the newsletter.

Igor’s zine was a pointed example of the practice of vernacular creativity in the service of cultural citizenship that predates contemporary digital culture by two

⁵¹ After Igor’s stroke he received a plaque of recognition from the Italian ‘Dalmatia in the world’ association for his contributions to the diasporic community.

decades. *El Zaratín* is designed to serve vernacular interests, using vernacular means and readily available technologies (the typewriter, the photocopier, the analogue database, the postal service). Over the period in which it was being produced, technological change transformed the economics and distribution possibilities of the publication. However, if Igor was still able to work on it, with the assistance of his son, or neighbours, would he have bought a scanner to incorporate reader-contributed photographs or letters, connected the computer to the Internet, and used weblog software with free hosting to convert the zine into an online journal? Would *El Zaratín* have been transformed from a ‘private’ publication circulating within a bounded peer community to the site of a *public community of practice*, converging around the publication, but at the same time—through the weblog’s in-built porousness to links and conversation—functioning as a node in a more heterogeneous cultural network?

5. Discussion

Although the Digital Storytelling workshop is designed to be enjoyable, even fun, it has become clear during the course of research for this case study that, very often, when people have the opportunity to create content for public consumption for the first time they choose to use this opportunity to talk about what the serious business of the human experience—life, loss, belonging, hope for the future, friendship and love—mean to them. Across all the contexts discussed above, digital stories tend to be shaped toward an aesthetic of authenticity. Rather than employing ellipsis, a refusal of closure, wit and irony, digital stories are in general marked by their sincerity, warmth, and humanity, *because* they are fundamentally built around the

well-established modes of communication that structure everyday storytelling. But in some ways, as cultural studies researchers, to work with these stories and their tellers is to be literally confounded: it is not immediately obvious what one ‘should’ say about them.

One of the most ‘ordinary’ of the YIRN stories was produced by Kelly, a participant in her mid-twenties who was a volunteer at the Fortitude Valley Visible Ink Space and an undergraduate student at a local university. In her story, entitled ‘Gift’, Kelly reflects on her experience of becoming pregnant at a young age and eventually concludes that becoming a mother had created opportunities rather than closing them off. With the added responsibility of parenthood, she says, came the decision to go to university and participate more in community life. In the final sequence, while images of Kelly sitting on the steps with her four-year-old daughter slowly appear and dissolve on screen, she says, “I can still hear people saying ‘your life is over when you have children’, but when I stop and look at where my life is today, I know they were wrong.” This story can be viewed as an example of the specificity of very ordinary experience—and as a claim of agency for ordinary people in making sense of our own lives within the constraints of social circumstances and in relation to dominant discourses of the family.

Taking a critical textual analysis approach to this story, there are a number of things that could be said about it straight away, without even seeing it. Such an analysis might say that this young woman is constructing her identity primarily according to her reproductive function; that there is a strong narrative of self-actualisation at work; that it relies on clichés representative of dominant discourses of femininity,

family, and individual agency, all of which mask social structures and power relations. But this type of critique is not only disrespectful to the participant; it is also a misrecognition of the nature of the text itself. What we are looking at when we look at an autobiographical digital story—the self-authored snapshot of an individual human life produced in contexts that are to some degree removed from the logics of the commercial cultural industries—is something that sits uncomfortably with both our most celebratory and critical definitions of ‘popular culture’, and so with the available critical toolkit for textual analysis.

A different way of looking at even the most apparently conservative or sentimental digital stories is to say that they balance the personal with the universal and the universally accessible, through a combination of familiar tropes and the strong affective resonances created by the warmth and visceral presence of the narrator’s voiceover. Because of the way it is presented in the sound field (mixed front-and-centre and dry, with sound effects and music very much subordinated to it) the Digital Storytelling voiceover represents what Michel Chion (1990: 79-80) calls the “I-voice”:

In a film, when the voice is heard in sound close-up without reverb, it is likely to be at once the voice the spectator internalises as his or her own and the voice that takes total possession of the diegetic space. It is both completely internal and invading the entire universe...Of course the voice owes this special status to the fact that it is the original, definitive sound that both fills us and comes from us.

The primacy of the recorded voice, then, places Digital Storytelling at some distance from the textual and visual emphasis of most ‘new media’, especially web-based, culture. This can be understood as a kind of reverse engineering of new media aesthetics, recapturing the warmth of human intimacy from the imperative of innovation. For the storyteller, the digital story is a means of ‘becoming real’ to others, on the basis of shared experience and affective resonances. Many of the stories are, quite literally, touching.

Under these criteria, even cliché is not necessarily a negative quality, but takes on a positive dimension as shared language (i.e. a feature of readership, not authorship). Stock themes and clichés become shared lexical elements through which individual creativity can work in the service of peer-to-peer communication, enabling access at either end of the creative process. Somewhat paradoxically from a critical perspective, it is the very qualities that mark digital stories as uncool, conservative, and ideologically suspect—‘stock’ tropes, nostalgia, even sentimentality—that give them the power of social connectivity, while the sense of authentic self-expression that they convey lowers the barriers to empathy, surely the most vital affective element in productive encounters with cultural difference.

These observations mirror those of Abrahams, who argues that ‘the vernacular has special capacities to make stories by transforming happenings into a form which can be understood in a conversational setting’ (Abrahams, 2005: 71). Within the workshops themselves, the ‘story circle’ adheres to the format of conversational storytelling in groups, which Abrahams describes in a deceptively simple way:

Swapping experiences is a friendly act which permits one to talk about

oneself...insofar as they follow other similar tales and lead to the recounting of others, stories elicit further stories using conversational norms. (Abrahams, 2005: 75)

Despite their digital remediation and the rather out-of-the-ordinary experience of attending a Digital Storytelling workshop, it is this conversational form of storytelling that is responsible for any cultural effects that digital stories might have, because Digital Storytelling is absolutely grounded in everyday storytelling, and everyday storytelling is probably the most powerful and universally practiced form of vernacular creativity; so it is always already something that participants can already do, and with which 'ordinary' audiences can readily engage.

In terms of cultural economy as well as aesthetics and form, digital stories are very different from what is commonly understood by the term 'popular culture'. Despite some inroads into their mass distribution (especially by the BBC), digital stories are not 'commercial' culture, although they may draw on it; nor are they straightforward examples of the discourses of dominant 'institutions'. Their authors are 'ordinary' people but because of the conditions of cultural production that structure Digital Storytelling, they are neither purely autonomous 'folk' artists, nor the victims of the surveillance of everyday life typical of both 'documentary' and reality television (Andrejevic, 2003: 130).

As Digital Storytelling projects proliferate in a range of institutional contexts and the resulting weight of evidence begins to accumulate, it is becoming clear that the practice of Digital Storytelling is socially shaped in ways that are specific to those contexts but that combine to create aesthetic norms of authenticity and ‘ordinariness’. Most significantly, the reliance on an instructional mode of knowledge transfer, and the intensive workshop model that enables any willing participant to take part, regardless of whether they would normally have access to the technology or skills required, as well as making it very resource-intensive, places the practice of Digital Storytelling at quite a remove from both Internet culture and everyday life. I would suggest that it is predominantly for this reason that Digital Storytelling has not been taken up to any significant extent except in institutional contexts: education, community arts organisations, community media, and cultural institutions. One notable exception to this is the ongoing Digital Storytelling workshop program at the Blackwood Miners’ Institute in Wales, which is one of the few independent spin-offs of the *Capture Wales* project. Even there, though, I would argue that Digital Storytelling has taken root because there is a stable organisational base that can draw on existing resources and accrue a store of knowledge and expertise in order to establish a sustainable enterprise.

However, the fact remains that the participants in workshops of this kind are often on the wrong side of the ‘digital divide’, and are not necessarily likely to be participants in the apparently autonomous new media cultures (blogging, computer games, fandom) that are more frequently discussed and celebrated—without some additional motivation and support, many of the participants in Digital Storytelling may never

use a computer or participate actively in any new media context at all. In the case of Digital Storytelling, as with the Kodak camera and the GUI-equipped standardisation of personal computing, there is a certain amount of technological and aesthetic *closure* that goes along with the attempt to enable widespread access to cultural production. But the same constraints that *limit* the aesthetic range of vernacular creativity to a particular construction of authenticity and elegance, and limit the conditions of production to institutional contexts, are also necessary *preconditions* of Digital Storytelling's potential to amplify the ordinary voice.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

1. Significance of the Study

This thesis introduced the idea of vernacular creativity as a conceptual lens through which to focus on the creative practices—from everyday storytelling and play to snapshot photography and the production of home movies—that have long been an unremarkable part of everyday domestic and community life, but which are now increasingly visible, in remediating forms, as dynamic elements of the cultural public sphere, rather than being limited to the hidden domain of ‘the everyday’.

The thesis began from a position of ‘critical optimism’. It did not set out to debunk utopian, hyperbolic discourse around the ‘democratisation’ of technologies, but to provide concrete, grounded investigations of the sites of cultural practice for which hyperbolic claims have been made. Taking into account the significance of developments in participatory media culture between 2004 and 2006, the thesis sought to determine under what circumstances, and for whom, and in what ways the digital remediation of vernacular creativity might represent ‘spaces of hope’ for cultural citizenship.

The cultural studies approach that I took to this enquiry was uniquely suited to this purpose, bringing with it conceptual tools that could be usefully employed in the investigation of empirical case studies. First, past work in cultural studies contributed an understanding of the ways in which everyday creativity could be

situated in the context of reconfigured relations of cultural production and consumption. Second, cultural studies perspectives on citizenship and publics allowed me to propose models of cultural citizenship that might be appropriate for understanding the dynamics of participation in the emergent networked cultural public sphere.

In the case studies, this conceptual framework was articulated with the deliberate choice of methodologies that allowed me to ‘go in close’ to the detail of lived experience and social practice at these sites: for the most part, the material for the case studies is the result of participant observation combined with textual analysis and discourse analysis. This approach allowed me to investigate and describe the ways in which the values, norms and content of these new and emerging sites of cultural practice are shaped by the ethics, aesthetics and discourses of the cultural contexts in which they are situated, and therefore to suggest what the implications of the remediation of vernacular creativity might be for the broader context of popular culture, the cultural public sphere, and cultural citizenship.

2. Discussion of Findings

The critical optimist position, which entails engaging with—even to some extent appropriating—the substance of mainstream discourse rather than exclusively critiquing it, allowed me to begin with the assumption that there might indeed be something ‘new’ about new media for everyday creativity. Most importantly, I pointed to theories that the relations of cultural production were in some sense being reconfigured, such that the relational category of the audience must now be reconsidered, not only as semiotically active, but as productively creative, and—

most importantly—that the creative content produced by ‘ordinary’ people now contributes significantly to the content of the cultural public sphere. It is this last feature of participatory digital culture that most markedly distinguishes vernacular creativity in new media contexts from the creativity of the active audience, as in the practices of fandom in the broadcast-only era discussed in Chapter 2.

I suggested that if ‘ordinary’ vernacular creativity does have the potential to contribute to public culture, then its emergent forms and practices must also have implications for cultural citizenship, where cultural citizenship is understood as the practice of active participation in the cultural public sphere. This prospect, I argued, significantly raises the stakes for cultural studies work on everyday engagement with popular culture. Chapter 2 further developed the argument that the articulation of vernacular creativity with digital technologies and networks constitutes spaces for the practice of cultural citizenship. Such spaces, I argued, have the potential to support the self-mediated representation of ordinary specificity by individuals, and the potential for such self-mediated representations to forge multiple social connections among cultural citizens.

But if there was indeed something ‘new’ about the current phase of emergent new media for this articulation of vernacular creativity with cultural citizenship, then the cultural dynamics of technological ‘newness’ clearly needed to be included as a key element in the conceptual framework of the thesis. It was important to investigate how technological change interacts with everyday creativity, and how particular modes of cultural participation are shaped by it. In Chapter 3 I established a position on these questions, focusing on the role of the market and technological innovations

in creating and shaping spaces of participation in new media forms. While new media technologies have never literally ‘enabled’ vernacular creativity, neither has vernacular creativity ever existed in a pure form. Rather, it has always been tied up with social and technological change, and it has always operated in relation to the specific social worlds of its practitioners, markets and institutions. Therefore, the digital remediation of vernacular creativity is produced by complex relations among providers, platforms and technologies on the one hand, and the existing diversity of individual and collective vernacular creativity on the other. It is the specific conditions under which this remediation occurs that has occupied me throughout the thesis.

The Remediation of Vernacular Creativity

Everyday snapshot photography is arguably the most persistent of all vernacular media forms. All of its genres are represented in Flickr somewhere: baby and pet photographs; the documentation of family events; the visual record of holidays and the mundanity of everyday life. The point at which remediation begins is when these photographs are uploaded to an individual user’s database, and become part of both a shared public resource and nodes in a large social network. In Flickr, vernacular photography is transformed from self-contained personal media to publicly accessible social media. Likewise, everyday storytelling, life narrative and the domestic archive of biographical images—the photo album—are remediated in Digital Storytelling, transforming them from one-to-one, private forms of communication to public vernacular culture.

Much of the discourse around user-generated content tends to frame its emergence as a straightforward subversion of the relations of cultural production that structured modernity. But both the case studies illustrate that in reality these relations are not being destroyed but undergoing a process of reconfiguration and convergence. I demonstrated that Flickr can be viewed as the site of a vernacular ‘relational aesthetics’ (Bourriaud, 2002), focused not on discrete art objects, but on the modes of social connection that are both made possible by and flow through images within the network. At the same time, those social connections are used to collaboratively construct, negotiate and learn visual aesthetics and techniques. Rather than representing a revolutionary takeover of photography by untrained amateurs, Flickr is a highly heterogeneous ‘architecture of participation’ where the social worlds, technologies and aesthetics of ‘professional’ photography, art and everyday life collide, compete and coexist to produce new forms of intensely social and playful cultural production. Digital Storytelling represents a different reconfiguration of these relations of cultural production. As a practice, Digital Storytelling is situated within the contexts of enabling institutions and organizations, often introducing media expertise and aesthetic literacies drawn from professional fields of cultural production—in this study, these include independent film, public service broadcasting, and public history.

Cultural Technologies and New Media Literacy

The analysis of the Flickr network presented here suggests that its most active users—those participating most in the activities that might constitute cultural citizenship—share specific cultural and technological competencies. I demonstrated that these competencies are almost indistinguishable from the practice of everyday

life for these participants, and that their negotiation of these competencies as they exploit the affordances of the network is experienced as a form of play. Further, I argued that the emerging aesthetic and ethical norms of Web 2.0 ‘architectures of participation’ map onto the cultural values and competencies of this social group. However, it is undeniable that the tools for democratic participation in new media are in fact available and at least theoretically accessible to a much broader demographic; and the pragmatism of participatory ethics dictates that it is urgent that non-elite members of society learn to use them in the effective service of diverse social and developmental goals. Such a view is represented by work such as that carried out by community Digital Storytelling programs. Neither Digital Storytelling’s modes of production (the workshop format) nor the forms of content it produces (the digital stories) are particularly ‘hackable’ by ordinary users. But Digital Storytelling is explicitly designed from the ground up to be usable—literally accessible to everyone, regardless of their existing technological or aesthetic competencies—and to function as a tool for cultural inclusion and the social extension of new media literacy.

Sites of Cultural Citizenship

Both Flickr and Digital Storytelling are, among other things, sites of cultural citizenship: spaces in which individuals can represent their identities and their perspectives on the world, engage with the self-representations of others, collaborate to produce significant contributions to public culture, and encounter cultural difference. Flickr holds significant potential for the practice of a cosmopolitan cultural citizenship (Stevenson, 2003b), because it is a convivial space of cultural difference where users do ‘bump up’ against others who have perspectives and

cultural identities different from their own. The ways in which participants in Flickr combine showcasing their own photography, admiring the work of their peers, and the collective participation in communities of practice demonstrate that, contra the arguments about the futility or otherwise of DIY celebrity (Hartley, 1999; Turner, 2004), DIY celebrity is neither the outcome nor even the goal for the majority of participants in Flickr. However, this study appears to indicate that meaningful access to all the layers of possible participation is limited to a particular segment of the population—those with the motivations, technological competencies and cultural capital sufficient to participate at all levels of engagement that the network affords. The ‘cultural citizens’ who encounter each other most are those who engage most deeply with these various layers.

Digital storytelling workshops, like Flickr, are intensely social, shaped not only around the creative expression of individual identities and perspectives, but also peer-to-peer collaboration, teaching and learning, and encounters with cultural difference. But, unlike the images in the Flickr database, when digital stories are published on the Internet, they are usually embedded as static content in the websites of the institutions or organisations that held the workshop. Although they may also sometimes appear in more generic online databases of peer-produced video content, such as YouTube or OurMedia,⁵² there is currently no online social network shaped around the sharing of digital stories. Additionally, the defining characteristic of the digital story—the individual, personal narrative—means that it is not a genre that

⁵² See <http://www.ourmedia.org>

lends itself easily to collective production or remixing. The form in itself runs counter to the emerging norms of cultural participation I drew out of the Flickr case study; norms which structure not only Flickr, but also blogging and videoblogging. The cultural significance of these forms, as distinct from both personal and broadcast media, lies predominantly in the extent to which that content becomes part of the landscape of shared public culture that is open to reuse and reappropriation by other users. Web 2.0 ‘architectures of participation’ are well suited to accretive, everyday, cumulative storytelling—the creation of many ‘small pieces loosely joined’ (Weinberger, 2002), building up over time, and weaving together with the stories of others.

To ask a slightly tongue-in-cheek question, what might ‘Digital Storytelling 2.0’ look like? It is not immediately obvious at this moment how or whether digital stories can easily be integrated into the ecosystem of the World Wide Web because digital stories are relatively closed texts and because they are still comparatively bandwidth-intensive. Most significantly, the workshop process that generates these stories is highly labour and resource intensive—it is not yet clear how many people would want to, or be able to, make these kinds of stories on their own, as part of the kind of mundane, everyday creative and communicative practices that structure participation in Flickr. If that is true, then the ‘participation gap’ will only continue to widen as platforms for vernacular content increase in cultural significance.

Clearly, it is becoming increasingly important that those who are involved in these forms of Digital Storytelling consider how their distribution networks can accommodate much more of the dialogic forms of interaction between peer producers and consumers that, as the Flickr case study demonstrates, not only builds

‘audiences’ for vernacular content, but symbiotically stimulates and enriches ongoing cultures of peer production, evaluation and dissemination.

3. Further Implications and Emerging Questions

In their introduction to the anthology *Hop on Pop*, Jenkins et al (2002) use the evocative phrase ‘culture that sticks to your skin’ to mark out what is distinctive and important about popular culture. Looking at ‘user-generated’ content creation in contemporary new media contexts through the conceptual lens of vernacular creativity, it is clear that the culture ‘that sticks to your skin’ can equally be produced by oneself and one’s peers as it can by the commercial media. At the same time, the platforms and networks that allow vernacular creativity to flourish are most often *provided* by the creative and cultural industries. Both of the chapters brought into relief this dependency—unanticipated in ‘revolutionary’ discourse—of such forms of participation on either market-led or public policy-driven platforms that enable participation and engagement to flourish. However open and malleable the Flickr network is to users, and even though the content remains the intellectual property of the participants, it is in reality a proprietary space. Digital Storytelling is situated in parallel to Flickr and the Web 2.0 model: in its dominant form it is supported by various configurations of industry, government and public service broadcasting institutions and organizations that, somewhat paradoxically, position the practice of vernacular creativity in the domain of cultural citizenship while attempting to create spaces for it outside of the market.

Although Benkler’s (2006: 299-300) claim that the emergence of peer-produced culture represents a renaissance of folk culture relies on too simplistic a divide

between the culture of ‘the people’ and the culture of the mass media industries, it does appear that the concept of ‘popular culture’ might once again be opened up—as it was by the pioneering studies of fan cultures—to allow for forms of everyday cultural practice that go beyond the reactive forms of ‘resistance’ that cultural studies found in them in the 1980s, and allow for new proactive forms of engagement in the practice of cultural citizenship in participatory culture that draw directly on everyday experience, as well as being folded into everyday life via active and affective practices of consumption (Grossberg, 1992) at the ‘destination’ end of the ‘value chain of meaning’ (Hartley, 2004a).

It is important to admit that, in order to argue that the prevalence of user-led content *production* is proof of more active cultural participation, one must assume that *consumption* as the dominant mode of cultural engagement for ‘ordinary’ citizens had been *passive*. But it is this view of consumption as ‘passive’ that cultural studies has been arguing against since the 1980s, and it is in this area that cultural studies has the most insights to offer to mainstream debates. For example, Benkler’s (2006) enthusiasm about the possibilities of the new networks of social production implies an imagined opposition between a pre-industrial folk culture and the alienation of twentieth century mass popular culture, which ‘displaced’ folk culture and transformed individuals and communities from ‘coproducers and replicators to passive consumers’ (Benkler, 2006: 296).

One of the main features of contemporary new media contexts like Flickr is the way that vernacular content circulates in social networks, so that participants are always already consumers, producers, editors, and critics. But the cultural implications of

the ‘audienceing’ or active consumption activities that form part of this complexity are not yet well understood. How can we understand and even measure forms of engagement, like ‘reading’, that leave no physical traces on the network? What are the cultural dynamics of commenting systems? What do folksonomies, tagging systems and other social network-based content filters mean, not only for the collaborative construction of cultural value, but for the practices of reading, understanding, and the construction of meaning?

This study has itself looked for ‘active’ participation in spaces where vernacular creativity results in some kind of *production*. But rather than believing that the undeniable existence of a more visibly ‘active’ and creative audience negates the need for the arguments of the active audience tradition, if we are to make meaningful interventions into contemporary attempts to account for the significance and implications of participatory culture, then perhaps the proper next step for media and cultural studies is to return to the issue of the active audience, and the core idea that cultural consumption must be understood as social practice. Returning to the problematic ‘continuum of participation’ model, which imagines reading as the lowest level of engagement, perhaps it is time we took more seriously once again the value of an informed, active audience—in this case, an audience *for* vernacular creativity. This is especially important if vernacular creativity has social value beyond the individualistic pleasures of production or self-expression, and if its remediation as part of the networked cultural public sphere does indeed open up spaces for the practice of cultural citizenship.

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