Chapter 4
Interpretive Strategies for Analyzing Digital Texts

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings together the disciplines of media studies and software systems engineering; it focuses on the challenge of finding methodologies to measure, test and decode meaning in digital cultural objects. The authors draw on a variety of examples: interactive online digital art projects; an interactive, immersive screen-based art installation; re-mediated digital art installation; a videogame; and a medical interface example, in order to determine if it is possible to map interpretive strategies that include a blending of old and new criteria, but ultimately promoting an equal partnership between artist and audience, and thus, a community of co-creators.

INTRODUCTION

It has become a commonplace notion that digital technology has revolutionized artistic practice. Computer technology has changed the way we relate to society and how we express ideas in a very fundamental way. As screens of all sizes, and media culture in general, now define our worlds, it is imperative that we find ways to decode signifying strategies of digital creative cultural practices (Memmott, 2006, pp. 293). Media theorist Roberto Simanowski asserts that it is increasingly important to “define a conceptual framework for understanding the social changes produced by digital media and to show students and readers how to interact critically with digital media and culture” (2011, pp. 1). We argue that the challenge is much more urgent and complex given the globalized contexts within which world citizens increasingly find themselves. In order to take up this challenge, we propose the consideration of a hybrid strategy that draws on an established process of analysis for cinema, but also is infused with a grammar of interaction (a specific mode of interaction made possible by the creator of the cultural object/product). We are still at the
beginning stages of testing this methodology in this manner and are therefore presenting some preliminary thoughts and findings in this chapter. Further work is required in this vast enterprise.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the move from the material object to the information object, debates have abounded around the nature of exact replication and reproduction and whether or not it is possible to represent the "real" in its constitutive form. For example, Stuart Hall (2000, pp. 52) argues that a "‘raw’ historical event" is impossible to portray in visual media in its pure state because such media (cinema, television and web-based products) must encode the events within the aesthetic and discursive parameters particular to the media involved. As a result, the very act of documenting the "real" alters it in a perceptible manner, creating a new version of the real event that may be similar to but is not wholly representative of that event. The French semiologist Jean Baudrillard, for example, advanced the concept of the "hyperreal," in which the simulacra no longer reference origin or reality because the real is now produced "from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models" (Baudrillard, 2001, pp. 169).

Given that it can be reproduced indefinitely, signs are substituted for the real, thus undermining concepts of truth and veracity, and "leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference" (Baudrillard, 2001, pp. 169).

Movement into the digital age has further complicated the debate. Digital texts present unique challenges for current methodological processes, primarily because they are inherently interdisciplinary and convergent. By combining wide-ranging media strategies from photography to video streaming, to print text and beyond, these digital artworks demand new approaches for analysis. Genre theory is considered to be a solid method of analysis for understanding the function of story, plot and character in literature, cinema, digital literature and computer games, etc. Simanowski (2010) argues that concepts germane to classical rhetoric such as allegory and rhyme could also be deployed and “adapted to describe the stylistic devices of digital literature and art.” He proposes the animation of words to foreground “relationships between the elements of a kinetic text” (Simanowski, 2010). Simanowski (2010) also explains that although these discussions are occurring within the auspices of digital humanities forums, “scholars also must concentrate on the aesthetic aspects of digital media.”

Cinema and video, as art forms, have been well-served by a key methodological approach termed découpage analytique which involves shot by shot analysis that considers visual composition, editing, narrative elements and sound components in a holistic approach. This technique, or tool of analysis, offers a flexible means of isolating and describing the deep structure and aesthetics of cinematic and other visual forms (Aumont & Marie, 2007). A feature celluloid film of ninety minutes can easily include upwards of 130,000 shots. The “shot” is the basic unit of a film, between each splice, and in classical narrative cinema, shots are organized into spatiotemporal units of a single shot or a sequence of shots. A découpage analysis can be as simple or as minimal as a mere numbering of shots, and brief description of content and dialogue, or can be extremely detailed, describing shot size and length (in time), composition of the framing, camera movement, color, sound, dialogues, etc. One of the potential drawbacks of this technique is that it often tends to privilege the visual track (cinematography) at the expense of the sound track. Furthermore, certain types of camera movements such as zooms or pans can make it difficult to determine where the edits (splices) occur.

Découpage analytique is a process that allows the reader to understand how meaning is encoded in