



Digital Encounters

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DIGITAL ENCOUNTERS



I'm always texting and always looking at TV. If it's not texting and looking at TV, then it's computer and listening to my iPod, or talking on the phone and looking at TV. It's always crashing into each other.

—Diamond, 14

I will be just playing Xbox, playing FIFA, trying to score goals and listening to my iPod, or hooking up the iTunes or cranking up the stereo... Then I'll switch to my computer or go on YouTube, maybe get off and go on Pinacle or check out some new sites my friends tell me about. I do everything at once.

—Jan-Michael, age 15

I probably send 500 text messages to my friends a week.

—Gwen, 13¹



Many art, design, and museum educators know from practice what research is beginning to confirm: growing up today is largely a digitally mediated experience, and many young people face those experiences with few, if any, critical tools for engagement.

In the debate over digital media, one frequently hears comments that fall into one of two schools of thought. The first characterizes the media landscape in mostly negative terms with words like chaos, distraction, loss of privacy, exploitation, and the cutting-off of direct human connection. The second is more virtuous in its characterization, pointing to the crowd-sourcing of ideas and resources, democratization of information, expanded sensory possibilities, and global connections.

Perhaps the poles of this debate miss an important point. Engagements with the digital are not predetermined or one-sided. Even if highly scripted, the digital is a space of encounters that, like many other kinds of encounters, involves active negotiation, a dynamic of give and take, a push and pull. With social media, blogs, websites, text messages, video games, and streaming video and music services, there is no role for the passive media consumer (if such a person ever really existed). Digital encounters involve actively making choices—about where to look, what to click, when to finger swipe, whether or not to log on or off. Thus, even before one is faced with the task of interpreting representations on a digital platform, the human-technology interface presents opportunities for empowered looking as well as critical and creative response. In short, digital encounters are potential spaces of agency.

To understand digital media and the possibilities they hold for student agency, arts and media researcher Aylish Wood (2007) offers a constructive comparison. She observes that with traditional moving-image technologies, such as TV and movies, the viewing experience depends on a unified, harmonious composition in which the visual, auditory, and textual elements are arranged so that the viewer has a relatively seamless interaction with the technology. The seamlessness of the human-technology interface “effectively acts as a transparent window into the story-world” (Wood, 2007, p. 5) of the moving image.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IS NO LONGER NEW. There is a proliferation of digital devices at school, in the home, and on the streets. Research suggests that more than 90% of teenagers go online daily, and a quarter of them say they are online almost constantly (Lenhart, 2015). Children 8 to 18 years old spend on average 7.5 hours each day with media—more time than is given to any other activity except perhaps sleeping (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

In contrast to this transparent window, contemporary strategies of composition used with animations, time-based art installations, movie special effects, video games, and other forms of digital visual culture are based on competing rather than harmonious elements (Wood, 2007). This creates viewing experiences that are fragmented instead of continuous, jarring rather than stable, divergent rather than conforming. One need only reflect on commonplace uses of the personal computer to recognize this phenomenon. Consider how quickly a basic Internet search can lead to a multitude of tabs, pop-ups, and downloadable files, with each disjointed element simultaneously calling out for attention.

What happens when art students and educators encounter competing elements of digitally organized story-worlds? How do they negotiate which elements to pay attention to, to orient themselves by, to adapt, or to turn away from? Even before trying to make sense of visual imagery and express ideas with digital tools, what opportunities for agency are afforded by the technical architecture of the digital interface itself? In this issue, authors

consider how art students and educators are negotiating various types and occasions of digital encounter.

In “Touching to See: Tactile Learning, Assistive Technologies, and 3-D Printing,” **Aaron D. Knochel, Wen-Hsia Hsiao, and Alyssa Pittenger** share early findings from research in which they explore the possibilities for using 3-D printing technology to create tactile interfaces through which non-sighted and sighted persons can engage with visual works of art.

Stephanie Veronica Martyniuk considers digital games in the visual arts curriculum in “Game On!—Teaching Video Game Studies in the Arts Classroom.” She discusses various ways in which art educators can incorporate games as an art medium to teach visual representation, visual communication, and critical thinking.

In “Tumbling Lessons: Using Tumblr Iconography to Strengthen Multimodal Teaching and Learning in Preservice Art Education,” **Brooke A. Hofsess, Sara Scott Shields, and Gloria J. Wilson**

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describe an innovative approach to lesson design inspired by the multimodal elements of Tumblr, a widely used microblogging and social networking website.

Rachel M. Schiera shares findings from her practice-led research with high school students experiencing cross-cultural conflict in “The Storm Before the Calm: Negotiating Developing Values and Principles Through Discussion and BlogArt.” She describes how blogs and art were used in combination to enable students to explore sensitive topics, recognize their biases, communicate clearly with their peers, and develop conflict resolution skills.

In “Understanding Students’ Photographic Manipulation Through Theories of Knowledge,” **Yi-hui Huang** shares research findings that go beyond the technical aspects of digital photography to reveal the conceptual processes art students go through when developing and altering their photographs.

Cindy Hasio and **Wei Chen** demonstrate multimodal strategies of representation and meaning-making in “Interpreting Visual Semiotics With the Music Video *Man in the Mirror* in Art Education.”

In “Empowering Art Teaching and Learning With iPads,” **Tingting Windy Wang** discusses her research on the use of iPads in elementary- and middle-school art classes. She offers examples

of art projects and examines the upside and the downside of using iPads to teach art.

Laura Hetrick presents fan art in the Instructional Resources, “Reading Fan Art as Complex Texts.” By exploring who fans are, what fandom is about, and the various types of fan art, she shows how fan art can be something more than meets the eye.

The debates about what is gained and what is lost in the digital age may not be resolved anytime soon. After all, educators, pediatricians, researchers, and parents are only beginning to understand some of the effects of digital media on sensori-motor, psycho-social, and affective development during childhood and adolescence. What is more certain is that digital cultures and their technological architectures are an inextricable part of contemporary life. The teen voices at the opening of this editorial confirm as much. It is likely Jan-Michael, Gwen, Diamond, and many generations after them will experience technologies that are ever more sophisticated and immediate. In the pages that follow, I hope you will encounter for yourself new practices and ideas taking shape in the digital frontier of art, design, and museum education. ■

—Amelia M. Kraehe, Senior Editor

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Endnote

- ¹ In these interview excerpts from the research documentary “Profiles of Generation M(2),” teens describe how they use digital media, including smart phones, TV and DVR, computers, and video games (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010).

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