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From the Selected Works of William Walsh

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Digital Media: Technological and Social Challenges of the Interactive World

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Essays included in this volume are revised and peer-reviewed versions of conference papers presented at a 2009 invitation-only workshop on digital media at the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin. Participants were drawn from a number of disciplines, including information studies, fine arts, communication, technology and history, so that a variety of views could be voiced. While this approach undoubtedly worked well for a conference, it falls short for a scholarly monograph. Although brimming with ideas and differing perspectives on its very broad topic, this work—loosely organized into four sections—is too unfocused and uneven. This is unsurprising given the amount of ground it tries to cover. A narrower scope, or a more deliberate and systematic overview of the subject, would have likely made for a more compelling book.

Part 1, “Preserving Digital Media,” opens with an essay by Lowood exploring the complexities associated with attempts to preserve video games and virtual worlds. How does one, for example, determine which versions of Doom—the landmark first-person shooter originally released as shareware in 1993—are worthy of preservation? Doom allowed players to make modifications, such as creating new levels or creating different games (one of the more famous mods was based on the movie Aliens). Many of these modifications were almost as popular as the official releases of the game. In addition, Lowood argues that projects that focus mainly on preserving software are inadequate because documentation essential to understanding virtual worlds is generally not found in those worlds. Thus, a visitor now to the online game EverQuest will find no record of candlelight vigils held inside the game by players in the hours and days following the September 11th attacks. These vigils, of possible interest to scholars studying online communities, are documented elsewhere, largely through forum postings. I found this to be one of the strongest contributions to the collection. This section also contains an essay by Winget that looks at three personal collections of video game-related materials, including a library of 711 books from the game Ultima Online, and a chapter by Kraus that argues for the creation of a humanities center to guide intellectual property public policy and examines the role that piracy can play in preservation.

Part 2, “Describing Documents,” is not as focused on metadata issues as I expected. Marshall’s essay, which would have been at home in the previous section, looks at the problem of determining which is the authoritative copy of a given digital artifact when multiple copies are routinely saved, edited, described, published and annotated. She offers, as an example, the case of an animated music video made by an art student in Taiwan for a song by one of her favorite bands. Over time, ten copies of the video, including variant versions, accumulate on various sites, some posted by the artist and others by the band, each with different metadata and public comments. How should these differing versions, tags, descriptions and comments be reconciled, aggregated and preserved, if at all? The other essay in this section is by Feinberg, and it serves as a reminder to be aware of, and, up to a point, accepting of the biases inherent in all classification schemes.

Part 3, “The Personal Nature of Digital Media,” begins with a chapter by De Kosnik that calls for humanities scholars to adopt what she terms the “Personal Theory” method of writing, a combination of
first-person narrative and theoretical arguments. This style, she argues, is better-suited for an age when personal sharing on the web seems somewhat ubiquitous. She links this method to works by Plato, Descartes and Thoreau, and gives examples of how she feels it has been successfully employed more recently in publications such as Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* and N. Katherine Hayles’s *Writing Machines*. Despite agreeing with the author on the possible benefits of making academic writing more accessible, I found this to be one of the less compelling contributions to the collection. This section’s other essay is by Aspray. It examines two reports on technological literacy—one prepared in 1999 and one published in 2006—to look at the ways in which perceptions about needed technology skills change over time, not only because of technological innovation, but also because people’s expectations about the purpose of technology evolves.

The book’s final part, “Interactions between Technology and Culture,” contains a chapter by Pennycook on the impact of technology on how music is created and consumed, covering—among other topics—the use of musical notation programs, such as Sibelius and Finale, the evolution of portable music players and how programs like Apple’s GarageBand have reduced the learning curve for novices to create music. The book closes with a fine, but unfortunately brief essay by Balsamo highlighting examples of research efforts in the burgeoning field of digital humanities.

The editors of *Digital Media* say that it is suitable for use as a graduate textbook. That seems fair—although I found their quality uneven, individual chapters will certainly be of interest to many readers, particularly students starting to explore these concepts in library and information science courses. However, the book as a whole may prove too unwieldy and unfocused to appeal to a wider audience. Practitioners looking for depth on some of these important topics—on digital preservation and metadata, for example—will not be well served by this volume.

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