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Digital Diversions: Youth Culture in the Age of Multimedia

Editor: Julian Sefton-Green
Publisher: London: UCL Press, 1998
Review Published: January 1999

REVIEW 1: Gareth Evans

Copywriters and cyber pundits agree: when it comes to things digital, children know more than their parents. Turn on the television, there's a bespectacled teen from Lusk, Wyoming saving the family ranch by teaching his dad how to use Microsoft Excel. Flick through Don Tapscott's Growing Up Digital and find anecdote after anecdote about computer savvy kids alternately annoyed and amused by digitally doltish adults. Peruse the pages of Sherry Turkle's Life on the Screen and discover its uncommonly astute author claiming that, in the age of the Internet, "it is our children who are leading the way, and adults who are anxiously trailing behind" (10). But while such examples suggest that children are widely perceived as knowing more than adults about computers, how accurate is such a perception? This is among the questions addressed by a new essay collection, Digital Diversions: Youth Culture in the Age of Multimedia.

After a general introduction by the book's editor, Julian Sefton-Green, Digital Diversions offers seven empirical studies of how young people are using new technologies to remake youth culture in and for "the digital age" (2). These studies are international in scope, focus on young people who vary in age from 8 to their early 20s, and examine a range of computer-related topics. Thus, of the essays that make up Digital Diversions, two study young people's use of the Internet, while the other five offer, respectively, an analysis of the marketing of home computers in Australia; an examination of Swedish hackers and their relation to modernity; an account of the use of new technologies in London dance clubs; a study of the relationship between gender and computer game play among third grade American children; and an investigation of the creativity of British teenagers' use of computer graphics programs. While Digital Diversions is not as consistently interesting as this summary of its contents might suggest, it effectively questions common assumptions about young people's computer use, and raises important issues of educational policy.

Digital Diversions begins on a high-note with Sefton-Green's elucidation of

central issues and debates in current work on youth culture and digital technologies. In a fine introduction to the topics at hand, Sefton-Green touches on everything from how digital technology is contributing to a redefinition of youth to the relationship between new technologies and (post)modernity. His main focus, however, is on three topics: digital technologies and the speed-up of "contradictory tendencies towards globalization and localization" (7); computers and "changing notions of literacy" (9); and the many questions new technologies raise about "the practice of education" (10). Rather than attempt to ascribe a unitary impact to the new technologies, Sefton-Green seeks to "note contradictory tensions" in each of his areas of focus (7). This is not an approach that produces general answers or theories, but Sefton-Green's essay is all the better for it. While reading him will leave you no wiser about "what it all means," it will provide you with a valuable sense of digital technology's complex role in, and impact on, contemporary (youth) culture.

When Digital Diversions disappoints it is in those essays that exchange Sefton-Green's exploration of "contradictory tensions" for an attempt to pin down the meaning of a particular new technology. For example, in "Making Connections: Young People and the Internet," Chris Abbot’s effort to identify desire for community as the main reason youths get online surely underestimates not just the range, but also the complexity of young people's motivations for online activity. Jorgen Nissen's "Hackers: Masters of Modernity and Modern Technology" offers a similarly one-sided account of the activities of Swedish hackers. Nissen offers two conclusions: (1) in attempting to "master computer technology" hackers are also trying " to master modernity" (164), and (2) "technological . . . and societal systems" easily contain, and even turn to their advantage, hackers' attempts to challenge them (168). Such conclusions don't strike me as particularly implausible, but they do little to complicate or enrich our understanding of hackers. Equally disappointing is Helen Cunningham’s discussion of the uses of new technology in London nightclubs. Strangely, while Cunningham frequently refers to the club goers and workers she interviewed during her research, she includes not a single direct quotation from a participant in the club scene. Instead of the rich ethnographic account of club culture Cunningham might have delivered, the resulting essay is short on the inside scoop, offering surprisingly little concrete information about how new technologies are used in clubs.

But while Digital Diversions certainly has its low points, the book's four other essays go a long way towards redeeming the promise of its introduction. For example, in "Fun and Games Are Serious Business," Helen Nixon provides a solid account of the marketing of home computers in Australia. Examining the formal and informal "alliances" made by

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government agencies, "media conglomerates and computer corporations," Nixon shows how young people and their parents are positioned by "interlocking and often incompatible discourses of government policy, media culture, popular culture and the school" (38). While Nixon does a good job of showing how the materials she discusses are inflected by local, Australian, concerns, they will still seem eerily familiar to North American and, I suspect, European readers. Want to go somewhere Microsoft isn't today? You may be out of luck.

As Nixon shows, in Australia, as in other first world countries, computers and the Internet are simultaneously hailed as the key to national prosperity and individual success, a central component of "'good' parenting and 'quality' education," and the coolest toys a kid could own (38).Of course, even if one assumes that computer technology really can be, and provide, all things to all people, one is left begging at least one very large question: what sorts of educational policies and pedagogical methods are most likely to give children both a better and a more equal chance at becoming computer proficient? Some of the stronger essays in Digital Diversions concern themselves with aspects of this question. Karen Orr Vered, for example, examines how third grade boys and girls at an Apple school in Southern California play a computer game called Incredible Machine (1). Turning the conventional wisdom about gender and computer games on its head, Orr Vered argues that girls' seeming lack of interest in the game is caused not by its content but by an "environment" in which game playing is a noise-filled group activity (55). When they are able to play in an environment different from the one that confronts them at recess, girls prove themselves both fond of and adept at Incredible Machine. The key to "equitable access in computer play," she suggests, lies less in developing "'games for girls'" than in providing classroom environments in which girls feel comfortable playing (58).

While Orr Vered looks to classroom-based changes as a way forward, in "An American Otaku" (2), Joseph Tobin suggests that improved computer education may depend on exploring "nodes and networks of learning that function outside the parameters and vision of formal schooling" (127). Tobin reaches this conclusion after studying the online activities of his 15-year-old son, Isaac . To serve his "obsession" with the game Warhammer 40 K (109), Isaac builds his own "state-of-the-art" Web site, participates on a games' users list, produces graphics for other Warhammer fans, and both writes and receives vast quantities of e-mail (113). The skills Isaac uses on the Web were learned not at school, an institution of which he is "scornful" (114), but from a combination of "self-learning," interaction with peers, and discussions with David, a system engineer friend of the family (116). Isaac's relationship with David is "the antithesis of most high-school

student-teacher relationships. Isaac sets the problem. Isaac decides when class is in session. Isaac decides the scope and sequence of what he learns" (116). In Tobin's perfect school, all students-teacher relationships will be like this. Classes will be taught by "teachers who hated school but are accomplished lifetime self-learners" (126). The sign of good teaching will be "getting out of the way in the classroom" so students can "teach us and each other" (126).

Attractive as it is, I'm not completely convinced by Tobin's description of his perfect school. In particular, I'm generally suspicious of one method fits all pedagogy, even when it's student-centered. What's more, as Tobin is aware, Isaac is not "Everyteen." Most teenagers, even American ones, don't have his access to the latest hardware and software, much less support from an adult with a knowledge of any number of programming languages. These cavils notwithstanding, Tobin's essay is the most engaging read in Digital Diversions and makes telling points about why computer skills currently aren't taught effectively in most schools.

Isaac Tobin is the highly computer literate kid familiar to us from countless advertisements and anecdotes. However, not the least valuable aspect of Digital Diversions is the sense one gets of what rare creatures the Isaacs of the world are. Thus, in "Digital Visions: Children's 'Creative' Uses of New Technologies," Julian Sefton-Green and David Buckingham uncover very little evidence that young people in England possess either the equipment or the knowledge to use new technologies in sophisticated ways.

In the summer of 1995, Sefton-Green and Buckingham gave questionnaires to 1500 teenagers attending two demographically diverse English schools. They then interviewed some 90 of these students before finally observing four of them working on computers at home. Of the 1500 who answered the initial questionnaire, most did not have a computer at home, and those who did often owned machines with insufficient memory to make the most of graphics programs. Furthermore, of the approximately 90 students they interviewed, "only three or four" had Internet connections at home (72). Doubtless these figures would be higher if Sefton-Green and Buckingham repeated their research in 1998. Nonetheless, their figures from 1995 are so low that they are likely to force all but the most inattentive reader to question common assumptions about how widespread computer use and Internet access have become. Moreover, given Sefton-Green and Buckingham's other findings, it's no sure bet that improved equipment will necessarily have led to a flowering of creative cyber expression. For when, in 1995, Sefton-Green and Buckingham "asked students . . . what they had actually made on computers the most common response was that they hadn't. They drew 'just for fun . . . when I'm

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bored.' 'I muck about with pictures' or 'I just mess around' were almost universal responses" (73). William Gibson's comment that "the street finds its uses for things" is perhaps the most over-quoted sentence in cyber-criticism. While Gibson's phrase is commonly used to celebrate some real or imagined outsider's inventive appropriation of new technology, Sefton-Green and Buckingham provide a telling reminder that the street's uses for things are sometimes mundane.

Digital Diversions is at its most effective when, as in Sefton-Green and Buckingham's essay, it "questions the claims made for the so-called digital revolution" (81). Yes, teenagers such as the cyber fluent Isaac Tobin do exist. Who knows, there may even be such a place as Lusk, Wyoming. Most kids, however, even first-world kids, don't have the kinds of support Isaac Tobin has and they almost certainly aren't ever going to share in the fruits of Microsoft's advertising budget. It has to be said that Digital Diversions is uneven in quality. It also doesn't provide answers to many of the questions it raises about how to improve computer education or widen access to new technologies. It does, however, ask the right questions. And that, in an area of computer study that has tended to be heavy on anecdote and light on measured analysis, is a step in the right direction.

1. The title of Orr Vered's essay is "Blue Group Boys Play Incredible Machine, Girls Play Hopscotch: Social Discourse and Gendered Play at the Computer."

2. The full title of Tobin's essay is "An American Otaku (or, A Boy's Virtual Life on the Net)." "Otaku" is a Japanese term. According to Tobin, "in some respects, otaku is equivalent to 'hacker.' But unlike 'hacker,' otaku refers not just to someone skilled in using computers in nontraditional, unintended, and anti-authoritarian ways, but to someone whose computer interest and acumen is in the service of their obsession with a particular area of popular cultural knowledge" (109) Tobin's son Isaac is, as my comments on the essay suggest, a Warhammer otaku.

Gibson, William. Neuromancer. New York: Ace, 1984.

Tapscott, Don. Growing Up Digital:The Rise of the Net Generation. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998.

Turkle, Sherry. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

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University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He published; he perished. After fleeing the penury of lecturing, he currently writes old and new media training materials for clients in business and industry. He likes the living wage but, on the whole, would rather write about American literature.
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