



Lauren Rabinovitz, Abraham Geil, eds.. *Memory Bytes: History, Technology, and Digital Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. 344 pp. \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-3241-1.



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In conventional thought, the Internet serves to demarcate a new period in media. Anything that came before the "net" is old and obsolete. The new media of hypertext, combined with video and audio, form a way of communicating that is seen as vastly different from what came before. Similarly, it is not unusual for people to perceive the Internet as a complete, indivisible technology that was invented by a person, perhaps only ten years ago. The book, *Memory Bytes: History, Technology, and Digital Culture*, a collection of new articles by various authors, challenges these assumptions by taking a historical perspective. The historical perspective is important because many collections on digital culture focus on the newness of the digital age; there is usually an emphasis on what is different, and veneration for the latest technological device and how it might make the world a better place. While certainly technology can create new perspectives and effects, other perspectives on technology are often disregarded. The long view often shows us that what we think is new really is not. That's why this book is a welcome addition to the literature on the study of technology and digital culture. It covers a wide

range of disciplines; there is probably something for everyone in this collection. Since it is difficult to summarize and critique all of the essays in this collection, I will examine some of the better ones.

Many of the essays describe the previously undocumented or under-documented pre-history of digital culture. For example, in perhaps the most interesting essay in the book, Judith Babbitts writes about the popularity in the early 1900s of stereographs (3-D pictures seen through a viewing device). Like many people, I have a vague recollection of viewing stereographs as a child, but I never knew--until now--that it was once an enormous visual industry. The stereographic industry was a leader in visual education materials (including pictures of places around the world), and Babbitts describes the extensive reach of stereographic learning materials in schools across the United States. The stereograph is a good example of the way industries push technology into the school system, and provides insight into current debates about the place of the computer and other new technologies in education.

Lisa Gitelman contributes a fascinating piece on the history of the piano roll. This seemingly insignificant, and long forgotten, technology was the center of a court case regarding copyright laws and player pianos. The player piano was marketed as an entertainment device that allowed anyone to experience the great works of music in one's own home. Piano rolls were the engines of player pianos. No music royalties were paid on piano rolls because, the player piano industry argued, nothing was actually printed on them—they were simply holes in paper that the piano read. However, the sheet music business saw its sales drop as people purchased rolls. Gitelman describes the court case that argued that the rolls infringed on copyright. In the process, we can see distinct similarities between this case and digital devices like iPods in the modern act of downloading music.

Lauren Rabinovitz takes up a common theme in the study of film. This theme involves the disembodiment of the viewer and the creation of the "gaze" in the process of watching film. Rabinovitz uses the case of IMAX large-format film and Hale's Tours to show that film is not necessarily just about disembodiment and the gaze. Hale's Tours were early-nineteenth century films that took people on fantastic adventures such as train rides across the country. Much like viewers of IMAX films, the spectator felt physically involved in the events of the film. Interestingly, she argues that these types of films involve the body; thus the traditional view of film as disembodiment is not universal but only a fact of a certain type of film (albeit the most popular one in our history).

While almost all of the essays are excellent and insightful, a few fall short of that standard. A section about computer war simulations ends up simply describing the relationship between the Pentagon and computer designers without considering the significance of that relationship. Another essay, dealing with electronic literature, begins well, but never lives up to its potential. In the in-

roduction, the author poses the question of the nature of the author within the new collaborative Internet environment but then fails to follow up on that interesting notion; the rest of the piece reads more like a personal essay than a scholarly article. The final chapter is also written with an informal style that I assume intends to mimic digital culture; however, the author's use of extensive quotation marks "becomes" "tiresome," very quickly.

Overall, the book is extremely well written and edited, with an easy-to-read style despite some theoretically challenging sections. It does not make the same assumptions of many other books, namely it does not assume that everything new in our digital world really is new. The book grounds technology in historical and social circumstances, and it uses unique case studies that are intriguing and insightful.

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