

Chapter IX

Film Theory

The second part of this book investigates the computer learning environment as a medium by looking at media theory and relevant film criticism, including documentary and fiction film theory. Media theory reveals the social aspects of the development of new media and places computer environments within a larger tradition. Recent film theorists who use cognitive approaches to explore meaning construction within a viewer also provide a foundation for understanding the computer user. Film narrative and non-narrative conventions help illuminate key issues in computer environments' use of narrative. Specific applications of theory in the use of simulation as well as case studies are discussed. Finally, I conclude with a review of what we know about the design of computer learning environments, and offer some speculative thoughts on the future uses of technology in education. As opposed to the first part of this book that detailed what we know about distance learning, this second half is intended to spark ideas for designers and educators about new ways to learn.

CURRENT PRACTICES

In this chapter, I review the survey findings on current use of media in education, review film and media theory, and consider the specific ramifications of computer as a medium used for education. I begin with the current use of media in American distance learning format courses. As is true of most things in higher education, researchers seeking to understand current practices are immediately confronted with a rich variety of institutional practice. Lynch (1998) describes the experience of George Washington University, an early leader in distance learning in the United States, paralleling the experience at many institutions over the last decade where the evolving technologies led to a constant upgrading and transformation of delivery systems, moving from low to high quality video, then to web-based and integrated digital video. News talk or variety-style video productions came to George Washington University with the collaboration of a for-profit company, Jones Entertainment, with camera movement, three-camera style, and scripted broadcast-quality techniques the norm in this transition. Lynch further describes how the move to the Web led to a rethinking of video as only one content source, no longer as the delivery system itself. Currently, the inability of digital technology to accommodate large video files has thus far limited their use in distance learning. The stress of large image files has led to small video screen sizes, with medium shots and close-ups used with short takes to compensate for the necessary technical limitation.

While undoubtedly computers are becoming better able to accommodate video, this experience of evolving style coupled with quickly changing technology was a common occurrence in many higher education institutions over the past decade. In addition to the evolving technology, management issues have affected how media are used in distance learning courses. Lynch relates how George Washington University ran into problems with scheduling in the tight format in terms of the course content and in working with faculty unaccustomed to a demanding production schedule. He claims the reduction in the reliance on video created a more interactive and integrated learning environment for students in the early stages of computer-based learning.

Partly because of the technological limitations, the George Washington University history reveals, and because of a lack of understanding about how and when to use media, most distance learning courses are media poor. In the 2000 survey, administrators were asked to compare the experience of taking one of their distance learning courses to another medium. In response to the question of which of the following is most like taking one of their distance learning courses, they responded that the experience most closely paralleled reading a book (27.3%) or writing letters (25.5%) (see Figure 22).

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