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Rachel S. Smith, Editor

A Call for the Corporeal 'cause Pixels Are Ephemeral and Archeologists Won't Find Them

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Much of a student's life today is spent online in a virtual world, blogging, IMing, in Second Life, in Facebook, etc. The *Call for the Corporeal* was designed to bridge the gap between a student's virtual world and real world experiences. The session addressed how to provide guidance and education to demonstrate that technology is not a black hole, that the virtual can become real. Further, the session discussed the value of an individual's online creations in a new and formerly intangible context.

So let us continue the conversation...

When asked to write this essay on my NMC 2008 presentation "A Call for the Corporeal 'cause Pixels Are Ephemeral and Archeologists Won't Find Them," the charge was to relate to the topic of the presentation, provide additional information, include rich media, and be creative in my approach. Addressing this last item first, to be creative in my approach, I decided to simply continue the conversation that was started in Princeton. Of course not everyone reading this was present for that conversation so, by necessity, some of this will re-tread those ideas. There is method to the madness of not presenting the essay in the 'modern' third person. While I hope it comes off as creative, it more importantly frees me from the illusion that this is an objective presentation of researched facts. It is actually a subjective presentation of arguments and opinions (with some facts) designed to elicit both emotional and intellectual responses. And freed from the "taint of neutrality," I hope that it inspires the reader to do something – even if it is as simple as emailing me and telling me that you disagree and think I'm full of crap.

The second slide of the PowerPoint that supported my presentation displayed a large stone circle with the caption "behold the wheel." You see, over the years I've noticed that most presentations given at conferences spotlight new research or a new discovery. However, as my presentation was not one of those, I felt it was important to point out my lack of wheel-like discovery. This is more than a simple notation or observation. Too often I have attended a session at some conference where the presenter, in their enthusiasm, has erroneously misrepresented an experience as an idea. A recent example at an educational conference (not the NMC) involved a presenter talking about the use of blogs in education. I attended the session due to my enthusiasm for blogs in education and compelled (i.e. forced) a friend who knew nothing of the technology to attend with me. However when describing his project, the presenter spoke too definitively; and the line between the technology and his particular use of the technology was blurred. My inexperienced friend thought it was very interesting. Regretfully he also thought that blogging was a brand new idea and that the presenter invented blogs. I, of course, was very disappointed. I saw nothing that I hadn't seen or done before, presented in a way that I felt was misleading. I don't mean to come off as snobbish, as I was actually pleased with the project just not with the presentation. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that when it comes to pedagogy I am a snob. I wanted to know why they were doing what they were doing and I wanted to see the results couched in a context that what they were doing was only "new to them."

This is not just a casual aside, but is in fact the heart of my thesis and the way in which we communicate and disseminate information. I know in my enthusiasm for a topic my tone can come off as evangelical and I often need to remind my students that nothing I am saying is actually gospel. But let me return to the title, "A Call for the Corporeal 'cause Pixels

Are Ephemeral and Archeologists Won't Find Them." When I first showed it to one of my students he looked at me sheepishly and asked "So you want people to print things out more?" And my answer was "Yes, I want you to print things out more." And in a rejection of rich media I prepared a PowerPoint presentation that contained only 4 slides for the entire 75-minute session. The first was the title slide, the second was the aforementioned "behold the wheel" slide, the third was a black screen (which I displayed for the bulk of my presentation), and the fourth featured a simple "Thank You – Any Questions?" So how did I engage my audience for 75 minutes without technology? Well, recently my friend Tony Morris shared with me the following joke: How many performance artists does it take to change a light bulb? The answer: I don't know; I didn't stay. Bad jokes aside, I approach a presentation as if it were performance art. It is something to be experienced that hopefully inspires and stimulates further discussion (with or without me) and, yes, has the danger of losing the audience. This presentation was more performance than most of those I had given before, as this time I used almost no PowerPoint and instead used a large box of props – which we in the educational business call "visual aids." In a previous talk I once referred to myself as the Chicken Little of the NMC, but standing there with my box full of props I felt more like the comedian Carrot-Top. In retrospect I should have recorded it, if only for my own reference. There is no escaping the irony in all this: documenting a presentation, devoid of rich media, designed as a free-flowing dialogue and performance, on the topic of the need to print for a document being disseminated for the most part electronically.

Value

Let me move forward and talk about value. The basic definition of the term is that of importance or the equivalent amount of money that we use to estimate something's worth. I recently came back from Peru. It was a fantastic trip and while my friend Tim went to bring back cultural artifacts for the Art Education program, I was there to bring back pictures. Actually "pictures" is an oversimplification. I was there to have experiences and to encapsulate those experiences using visual expression. On this trip I took more than 2600 pictures over the course of 2 intense weeks (about 2100 with a film camera and 500 with a digital). I know how much money I spent on the film, development, and printing. If I take that amount and divide it by 2600 does that give me the value of each picture? What if I add in the going rate for my time? (And which rate do I use: my day-job salary or my freelance consulting rate?) What if I add in the cost of travel? For some reason when I travel I keep track of every penny I spend, it's a compulsion that makes me feel that I'm not spending too much and that I know where my money is going. I kept these details in this obsessive little journal and I know it drove my friend Tim crazy. On a previous trip to France I calculated every dime I spent on gas and even calculated my mileage. But none of these expenses impact the worth of each image.

Those who attended my original presentation were asked if they wanted to see any of my Peru pictures. Instead of showing some PowerPoint or bringing up Flickr I pulled out a glossy 5x7" photograph of Machu Picchu and handed it to a participant. I then pulled out a fifty copies of the same photograph and passed them out so that each person had his or her own copy. In that moment the medium changed the meaning and increased the value. Instead of a group of people staring at a screen, each person held a photograph in their hands and had their own personal experience. The medium allowed for this intimacy and for both a deeper analysis of the image and a greater connection with it. I saw more than a few smiles when I told the group that the photo was theirs to keep. It's a strange phenomenon that I discovered years ago when I used to hang out in the smoking lounge of the local coffee shop. While I don't smoke, I used to always carry a pack of cigarettes and every so often someone would bum a cigarette from me. Back then a cigarette cost about a ten cents. But the level of gratitude from the recipient was completely disproportional. It is not about the inherent value of the item – a cigarette is after all just a cigarette - it's about the perceived sacrifice and the connection made. It showed I cared. The smiles on those attending the presentation were worth much more than the 39 cents each photo cost. And it runs deeper than that. I asked everyone to turn over the photograph because on the back each photos was signed and numbered. Again a round of smiles from the audience because now the item's perceived value had increased. Many (though not all) now looked at the photo a little differently and some thought twice about carelessly tossing it in their bag others even thought about matting and framing it; the signature now made it art. Why had its value increased? Is it the human touch? The time I took to sign each was minimal. Perhaps it is the implication of sacrifice, that these would be the only 50 copies of that photograph. And in a world of digital duplication scarcity even if artificial (i.e. I am saying there will only be 50) makes me want it more. But how could I make

it worth even more? So I pulled out a negative and a pair of scissors and I cut it up right in front of those attending. One person was so shocked that they put their hand on their chest and gave a little scream. To be fair, I pointed out that while I shoot on film, I scan the negatives so I pulled out a CD and then broke it in half. In that continued spirit of fairness I pointed out that since I printed them at Costco they were still on their servers. Did that make the value go down? This was all just a demonstration, as I don't have the heart to cut up one of my negatives. I have stayed true to my word though and have not printed any more of that image – those 50 photographs remain the only 50.

And even now as I seek to un-tether myself from the burden of worthless possessions I am becoming more and more enthralled by the greater value we place on real items as compared to virtual ones. A friend of mine recently showed me a necklace that her boyfriend acquired for her. He is a ceramicist and she was very proud to tell me that he traded his work for it. It meant more to her than if he had sold one of his vases and then purchased it with the proceeds. In many ways the monetary value of an object is just a compromise – it is what I would pay for it today based on my willingness to buy or my need to sell. And this vase, which we can envision as being inherently priceless until tagged with a price, stayed priceless as it was traded for something that also had not been tagged. With no conversion to currency, both items remain priceless and the artists find themselves dealing with values on a higher plane.

When I return from a photographic expedition I have a large task in front of me because no one, myself included, wants to see all 2600 pictures. The first cut is to simply eliminate the bad ones. This is the easy cut; I figure out which photos I never want to see again. The second cut is a little harder. I have several near identical photos, the same view of the same location but with subtle variations in exposure, focus, and composition. They are all similar and I have to pick out the best. It took me two days to cull the 2600 down to 500, which I then ordered chronologically in two albums. Now the next stage is tricky because it involves feedback from other people. I start to show the albums to people and I look for their reactions and to my own feelings when I am showing them. Within a few days I can cull them down again, removing the photos that don't tell my story and at times finding a better organizational structure (other than simple chronology). Now equipped with a thematically organized album of 260 photos, a mere 10% of the original 2600, I must live with the collection for a while. The last cut is the hardest and can only be done after some time has passed. I have to look at many unique views of the same place and choose which is most representational, to eliminate images that are fundamentally good. Throughout this process it is imperative that I never look back, that I never dip back into the discard pile or I might be lost in a sea of imagery and fall into madness. That isn't to say I throw the pictures in the garbage. A friend suggested that I could make some money selling my unused photos as stock photography. But what would that do to the value of my good pictures? I won't give others the opportunity to compromise my vision simply for a price. So it's quality or nothing. The one thread that is constant in this process is that the photos are prints, they are real, and none of this is done electronically, virtually, or from a distance. I won't let the medium distort the message.

Medium vs. Message

One of the most common things I hear from people when they look at my photos is "Wow, its like a postcard!" Now I understand what they mean when they say that. Generally it's the idea that the picture is prototypical – that if they only had one picture of the subject, this would be the one that they would want. There is another side however. Could I not also interpret it as "Y'know, I would buy that picture for 50 cents, write something meaningless on the back, and then send it to someone else.?" Do I really want my pictures to be a vehicle for "Having a great time, wish you were here!?" Similarly the medium of online photo sites such as Flickr does indeed change the message. This is not to say that there are not some fabulous photos and some wonderful photographers on these sites. But in many ways it's the difference between TV and the movies. When I am at home flipping channels in full control of the TV, I perceive it as free even though academically I know I pay a satellite bill and must sit through commercials and product placements. However, when I sit in the darkened movie theater having just paid for my ticket and trapped by the unidirectional prison of time, the movie (no matter how bad) gets my full attention. It goes deeper still. Why does a 2-hour crime movie get more reverence and respect (and budget) than a 2-part episode of Law and Order? The method is the same but the distribution medium is different. And with that difference comes a change in message (and value). How would this essay be different if it were posted on a blog instead of being part of the published proceedings? It is the same essay. If you are reading this electronically (which I hope you are not) then the experience might even be identical. Is it the endorsement or vetting by the NMC that makes the published version have more value? Does the medium help to

establish the meaning? Does the idea that these proceedings somewhere exist in print somehow increase the value of the electronic version? I think it does and I think this is a point that is often overlooked and too easily dismissed.

I am a big proponent of reading books electronically – note I did not say of e-books. Many years ago I owned a “Rocket E-book” (and I’m sure its still somewhere in my closet) and even though it was big and clunky and somewhat limited I found my experiences with it to be transformative. First, I like reading in bed so I found the self illuminated page comforting. But I was more amazed at how much easier it was to get ‘lost’ in the book. When I watch TV or sit in a movie theater I always have the ticking clock to guide me to the conclusion: 30 min, 1 hour, 2 hour etc. Generally this is the convention. With books we mark our place by the weight in our hands – as one side gets heavier and the other gets lighter. But when reading a book electronically sometimes the end can literally sneak up on me – more than once I had to go to a store to verify that the e-book hadn’t been erroneously truncated. Other times when I thought I was at the end I found out I has 1/3 more of the story left. It’s not a data file; it’s a book. But it’s only a book because I know that somewhere it’s ink on paper, bound, shelved, and catalogued. I always joke that I prefer to read books only by dead authors so I know how many volumes are in the series. And as much as I joke, there is some sincerity to the notion that I like the closure that comes with a published book. The book when it gets published is codified as complete and vetted as publishable, which could also imply its quality or at least its profitability, but is palpable regardless. With art they say that there is never completion only abandonment. But there is a real moment, whose catalyst might only be financial, when the work leaves the studio and in that moment it becomes complete. Items that are disseminated digitally tend not to have such a moment; infinitely editable and ever changing, they lack a state of completion or even of stability on which one can reflect. They don’t take a stand. So how can we trust them? The paradox is not unique to electronic media. It is also found in architecture as paradoxically summed up by the 19th century French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc who observed that “to restore an edifice is not to maintain it, repair or remake it, it is to re-establish it in a complete state that may never have existed at any given moment in the past.” With electronic media we cannot pick one moment in time over another and in the future I fear that when we look back we may be forced into romantic compromises of meaning, if we choose to acknowledge any value in it at all.

I started reading books electronically back in the early days of music “sharing,” and the culture of pirated e-books is vastly different than those in music. It is effortless to rip a CD while ripping a book is a labor of love. To spine it, scan it, OCR and correct it is a lot of work. The files are small and the demographic of its users literate. A librarian friend of mine insisted that I go to the bookstore and purchase the books so that the “heirs and assigns” got their money. He also felt that going to a used bookstore to take one off the market equally satisfied this requirement. In doing so, my actions would be “illegal” but not “immoral.” Right now, if you look at my bookshelf you will indeed find many books that I have read but that I have never opened. The other day I donned my virtual cutlass and eye patch and headed over to the IRC looking for pirate e-books. Looking isn’t a crime so I can freely share this story. And as I perused someone’s online library I made two interesting discoveries. The first is that it contained items found in the public domain, in fact, quite a quantity of them. And though this might only be a personal impression, seeing Harry Potter sitting next to Sherlock Holmes somehow ennobled the intent of the pirate distributor. He was there to share information regardless of its “status” in the law. It wasn’t a warehouse of illegal goods. It was a warehouse of content – some of which was illegal. Now I don’t condone the theft of intellectual property – I really don’t. My other observation was that in this library was a section devoted to books on intellectual property. I can almost imagine someone naïvely downloading books from this section and in the middle of reading one realizing the folly of their ways! But let me move this discussion from issues of legality to issues to practicality. In reality there is no such thing as copy protection. If you can see it you can copy it. DRM is an illusion and the more you try to implement it the more contrived it looks. That doesn’t mean I post PDF files of assigned articles for my students, I make them purchase a course-pack. And they hate it. They hate it because they don’t get why they should pay for what would be so easy for them to copy. And how many of you won’t assign course-packs for this very reason? Creating a course-pack is a lesson in value and if done properly the students will come to value it as much as a traditional textbook, possibly more if they actually use it.

And before I completely leave the subject of medium I need to point out that in the physical world there is no such thing as a “digital picture.” That is to say, “digital picture” is not a medium; it is at best a method. A painting at an art museum might indicate that the medium is “oil on canvas,” not what type of brush they used or the technique by which it was painted (all of which may be on the label just not listed as the medium). On the screen an image might

be digitally displayed but the way it is output (printed) dictates its medium. A digital file taken to a photo lab and chemically printed is as much a chromogenic print as the one created from a negative. Most people are surprised to learn that at most labs the negative is generally scanned first (there is no enlarger) and that all prints are at one point digital with the paper being exposed by red, green, and blue lasers. As a photographer I only have my images printed on Fujicolor Crystal Archive paper, Walmart prints these at 307DPI and Costco at 430DPI. A good old inkjet print might more fancifully be called a giclée print, though some would insist that to use this term the paper and inks must be archival – if anyone actually knew what archival really meant – and they appear to do a decent job at www.imagekind.com. All of this is important because the act of printing creates an instance; it's a transcendent moment than fulfills the potential of the digital file.

Real Output

I think everyone who works in the field of new media has been burned by it at some point. It is a medium that is too easily ravaged by time. My old projects don't run anymore. And I'm probably lucky. I know a guy who keeps old computers around so he can run his projects. He has an array of them set up in his basement so he can always look back. I've learned it's bad to look back. The underlying medium of these projects is the technology: the technology that we have outgrown. It isn't like looking at an old textbook and being able to view the knowledge as dated but in context. The technology outweighs the content. As much as we pretend to the contrary, we are building on an unstable foundation. How foolish would I be to think a website I created in 1997 will look good, and just a little dated, in 2008? My 1997 website probably looks about as good and dated as all of the other 1997 websites with little to make it stand out. My message got lost in the medium. Not to say that I haven't updated. I'm constantly carrying my message from medium to medium and the efforts are split between updating the medium and updating the message and it makes me feel like the medium is flawed. Now I am not advocating that we give up new and rich media. I just want a bigger payoff! I want my work to have longer legs, and in keeping my options open it generally means I need to explore other outputs.

I teach a graduate level art education course called Introduction to *Multimedia Technology*. It serves as a foundation to students who are training to be art teachers and who generally have little technology experience (or desire). When we designed the curriculum for the course we wanted to emphasize the relationship between technology and art, to use technology as the conduit but not the medium: technology as the pen but not the paper. While from a technical standpoint their first two projects are Photoshop projects, I prefer that my students instead focus on what they are creating. The first project is *Photoshop Fact and Fantasy*. I take a purposefully bad picture of each of my students. The image is in focus but badly composed and with the wrong white balance. The "fact" part of the assignment has them correct the photo while the "fantasy" has them take the corrected photo and do something fanciful with it. The final results are sent to the local photo lab and printed at 5x7". The assignment acclimates them to the consequences of their actions. With real photos in hand we are able to arrange the "fact" pictures in order from best to worst and conduct a more traditional critique. The second project is a large multicultural collage with very specific parameters. The final work is 12x18" with images from at least 10 sources; no source can be used more than once, no one source can dominate or become the focal point of the collage, and the culture must be one other than the student's own. The end product is the print and that is graded, not the digital file, and it is the print that hangs in the *Semester in Review* show next to the drawings, paintings, and traditional photography. Also accompanying the final collage is a statement and a bibliography. The premise is that the project is more than a technical exercise, it's research, and the final synthesized product contributes to a body of knowledge that can be used by subsequent art education students.

In many ways it's this notion of contributing to the larger body of knowledge that leads me away from the current trend in digital storytelling. I know it's impolitic to admit this but most of the digital story projects I have seen have been wonderful exercises in technology and therapy but not immediately accessible to a broader audience, they are too personal. Over the summer I worked with student interns from the Cleveland city schools. Each of these high-school students had to research and create a short digital story that interested them and related to Cleveland. They were advised however to leave themselves out of the story and to redirect their internal enthusiasm about how it related to them personally to an external motivation that inspired others to see what they had seen and feel what they had felt. It's an admittedly difficult task but the final videos stood on their own and came off more as fact than as testimonial.

My art education graduate students avoid this issue altogether by creating how-to videos that teach a specific task. Both groups of students, however, create more than just video clips. They author and publish a DVD, a tangible item, a product.

Last spring, for the first time, I had several advanced multimedia students. Their final project was to adapt a multicultural folktale (of their choice) into a photographic comic book using Plasq's ComicLife software and reference materials by Scott McCloud. It's a very complex project that addresses narrative, scripting, storyboarding, photography, project planning, and Photoshop. The final projects, which ranged from 12 to 26 pages, were sent to *lulu.com*, a print-on-demand self-publishing company which produced full color, bound 8.5x11" comic books. It is difficult to describe the reaction from the students when they saw their own creations made real and also from others who look at the work and instantly see the value in it. Perhaps this represents the epistemological crisis in new-media today.

The New Desktop Publishing

When I came back from Cameroon last summer, the professor who took me asked what I planned to do with my photos. I had just starting exploring various print-on-demand companies and decided to self-publish the photo essay, *A Cameroon Experience*, at *blurb.com*. While the companies make it easy by offering templates and wizards, I wanted full control – I didn't want to do what technology had done to me previously and just fill in the blanks. So I learned Adobe InDesign; spending as much time on the layout as I did correcting the images. When I received the first copy of the book in the mail I got a big surprise: closure. It had been a very difficult expedition and holding the book in my hand was a like having a weight lifted from my heart. Funnily enough, nothing is perfect and I later had to go back and fix two small mistakes and re-publish the book.

The success of the book is not really important to me. But it did open my eyes. The next step would be to get an ISBN number and then submit it to the Books in Print index. And that's where immortality is really found, in an index. Haven't you ever noticed that there are more records of the items that existed than the items that still exist. It's the irony of bureaucracy that for some bizarre reason we protect our lists more than our content. And we only inventory "real" things.

Conclusion

If you have made it this far I want to thank you for indulging me in my informality and lack of rich media. But this is just a start. Recently I started adding desktop publishing workshops to our development series and I want to see what others can make when they put their mind to it. And if you are reading this in print don't throw it away when you are done! Take it over to your library and ask them to catalogue it and add it to their collection (if you are reading this electronically, then forward it to a friend). Remember to make it "real" and to continue the conversation...

About the Author



Jared Bendis is an award winning artist, photographer, filmmaker, and teacher from Cleveland, Ohio. Jared is a specialist in photography, virtual reality, and computer graphics and the Creative Director of New Media for Case Western Reserve University's Freedman Center. Jared received his BA from Case Western Reserve University in Psychology with minors in Music and Art Studio. He received his MA in Art Education from the joint program of Case Western Reserve University and The Cleveland Institute of Art. In 2006 he entered the Art History and Museum Studies PhD joint program from Case Western Reserve University and The Cleveland Museum of Art. He also holds an appointment as adjunct instructor in Art History and Art at Case Western Reserve University where he teaches multimedia. On his first trip overseas, in March 2000, Jared visited the Chateau de Pierrefonds and became driven (if not obsessed) with capturing and sharing cultural and architectural experiences. As an artist and teacher, Jared has photographed almost 400 architectural and cultural sites (primarily castles) in 11 countries.