<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Converging on the internet: Asian audience reception of western entertainment web-sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Wilson, Tony</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tony Wilson
Graduate Communications Program
Monash University

CONVERGING ON THE INTERNET: ASIAN AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF WESTERN ENTERTAINMENT WEB-SITES

AMIC 9TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE
THE DIGITAL MILLENNIUM: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ASIAN MEDIA
June 29 – July 1, 2000, Singapore
Converging on the Internet
Asian Audience Reception of Western Entertainment Web-Sites

'The internet is an exhausting and unruly prospective subject for the academic researcher' (Lee, 1999: 263). Amongst those confronting potential exhaustion, turning to the phenomenology of 'play' (the ludic) may offer methodological relief. People's cross-cultural consumption of web pages on the internet can be understood as instantiating fundamental aspects of the ludic, as embodying modes of play.

Media reception is (and always has been) a ludic experience, 'serious fun' (Huizinga, 1970). Audiences actively enjoy both factual and fictional programmes (albeit often with a degree of guilt in the case of the latter). 'Common-knowledge' (Alasuutari, 1999) of pleasurably engaging with media texts is recognised by theorising these reactions as 'play'. But while there has been significant inquiry into the television audience, there is now a 'pressing need for descriptive and empirical research' (Howcroft, 1999: 278-79) on use of the internet.

Phenomenology describes the 'structure of experience' (Ihde, 1990: 22). Focussing here on internet access, the 'full range and multiple dimensions of that structure' (ibid.), must be explored. In the following, I show how different web genres, or types of on-line content, offer a range of opportunities for users to playfully respond to screen content.

Introduction

In the ludic theory of internet reception which I advance below, ideas more often thought appropriate to analysing a game provide a clarifying model of web use, of 'the micro-processes of reception' (Livingstone, 1999: 102). Like playful behaviour, going on-line is normally a consequence of free decision-making. Accessing internet content, as with involvement in a game, is an escape from mundane circumstances, prima facie fun. Playing in a dedicated material or virtual space during a similarly set-aside time means everyday life can be for the moment forgotten.
'Consumption stories' are far from 'fragmented' (Thompson, 1998: 135), with readers generally establishing texts as coherently meaningful. The metaphor of play is suggestive of the hermeneutic interpretative activity of comprehension appropriate to internet texts, in which audiences exercise their 'meaning making powers' (Barker, 1999: 108). Coming to understand a set of web pages linked by hypertext, integrating their ideas, requires a cognitive comparison of content, an energetic 'to-and-fro' movement of the mind which has a physical parallel in ball games. Likewise, to aim at a coherent account of an on-line text is to set oneself a goal, albeit confronted with the indeterminate and unpredictable content of the web. The pleasures of insight, of comprehension, comparable to those of success in sport, are a celebration of serious rule-following. Conceiving of (new) media consumption as playful, in short, allows us to focus on the 'discourses through which our very sense of the (different) media, of ourselves as their audience, and of our involvements with them, are constituted' (Morley, 1999: 195).

As with international sport, cross-cultural reception of internet content raises complex issues around the very possibility of 'players' mutual understanding. Authors and readers of web content (or indeed global television) may be attempting to enter 'mutually unintelligible life-worlds' (Lee, 1997: 215), with entirely diverging horizons or 'schemas' (Gandy, 1998: 51-58) of understanding experience. Signs of divergence appear below in Malaysian readings of a Western web.

(1) Consumer Research: Dis-located Theory/ Located Practice

Near philosophical, high theory of media consumption as play, of course, needs to 'face the facts' of audience behaviour. Put to the test in focus group discussion, hypotheses about internet reception can be confirmed, seen to require modification, or rejected.

Watching the web (I shall argue) is playful: it is also both complex and a relatively new experience. Yet the active internet surfer can hardly be considered entirely distinct in his or her behaviour from those who watch film in the cinema or enjoy television in domestic surroundings. Drawing on earlier 'paradigmatic' accounts of media content and consumption in elucidating the processes of responding to the internet is consequently appropriate (cf. Cuilenburg, 1998: 8).
The present investigation opens itself to assistance from reception studies of other media by focussing on audience reactions to web pages concerned with a previously dominant media form, cinema. The internet I consider here consists of web content celebrating (on fan pages), marketing (in corporate pages) or otherwise creatively reacting (eg. in web magazines) to two generically encrusted popular films: the punishing horror picture, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and the epic romantic tragedy, *Titanic* (1998).

The playful internet users whose articulate reactions support or subvert a ludic theory of new media consumption in this research enjoy lives embracing a rich cultural hybridity. Their reception of web content displays a consequent diversity. My ethnographic study of cinematic web page reception involved thirty Malaysian and Singaporean undergraduates who discussed their responses to film and internet content in a series of focus groups (mainly with three or four contributors). Students have the advantage for an academic of being more rapidly accessible research subjects than the wider population. Moreover, mostly in their formative years, they are both particularly sensitive to media content and able to reflectively articulate their reactions. Here, discussion involved volunteer subjects coming forward from pre-existing affinity groups in the student population.

Focus groups in which participants are talking to a cultural 'outsider' run the risk of encouraging their contributors merely to defensively recite 'insiders' received wisdom, the local 'party position' on matters ethical and political (eg. constructing an untroubled consensus on Asian values). Seeking to encourage departures from such a response to the film, of the four focus groups responding to *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, two were moderated by one of this paper's authors (a visiting European-Australian Caucasian middle-aged male academic) and the others by its co-author (a resident Malaysian Chinese young female academic).

In their everyday lives, Malaysians and Singaporeans are constantly crossing cultural horizons. They form two of the world's more culturally plurivocal Asian nations, with populations largely drawn (in differing proportions) from three major 'races' (to use the Malaysian term): Chinese, Indians and Malays. Focus group research here, as a result, is facilitated in exploring the possibility of ethnic difference in responses to internet media, producing a multi-cultural epistemology. Contributions in Malaysian ('Manglish') or Singaporean ('Singlish') English are thought-provoking, their linguistic hybridity suggestive of the equally diverse cultural horizons of understanding which must be crossed in consuming global media.
Significantly for this research, both countries are cutting-edge players amongst Asian nations in developing an internet-based communications policy and practice (Banerjee, 1999: 106-115). They are appropriate and supportive sites for the study of new media reception.

(2) Reception Studies: Philosophy and Practice

Arguing that people consume media in ways full of play commits one to a speculative hypothesis which clearly needs further examination. The methodological precepts of post-Popperian philosophy of science suggest that such a theory should be tested by attempting to falsify its claims as widely as possible. 'Every genuine test of a theory is an attempt to falsify it, or to refute it.' (Popper, 1963: 36) But this is no straightforward matter.

Forty years of work on the necessarily 'theory-laden' nature of experiential accounts (Kuhn, 1962) has shown the process of testing to be unavoidably uncertain. Hypotheses can continually be amended to accommodate 'awkward' facts. Data apparently in conflict with a theory can always be - more or less plausibly - reinterpreted to emerge as consistent with the hypothesis being scrutinised. 'Difficult' results may be dismissively read as aberrant. Adjustments of theory and data take time to appear ad hoc and implausible, albeit with many hypotheses eventually 'dying the death of a thousand qualifications'. After long laboratory tests, a few theories survive this slow process of confronting the world.

Below, I test the hypothesis that internet consumption is ludic against contributions in focus groups, and find that I have failed to falsify it. Participants do appear to engage in different modes of playful involvement with web content. For the moment, in post-Popperian terms, this theory has resisted attempted refutation and is to that degree confirmed. 'Confirming evidence should not count except when it is the result of a genuine test of the theory: and this means that it can be presented as a serious but unsuccessful attempt to falsify the theory' (Popper, 1963: 36). In the following, contributions from focus group participants are cited alongside citations from colleagues' empirical and theoretical research: a similar evidential status is sought for all.

In my initial consumer study of navigation on the internet, participants were shown a series of twenty web pages available on-line in late June 1998.
associated with the James Cameron film, *Titanic*. The size and mode of conducting these focus groups were varied to determine an optimum method of investigation.

Three sessions were held. First, at Lim Kok Wing Institute of Creative Technology in Kuala Lumpur, involving nine Chinese students of advertising and business communication (five male, four female) on 17th July 1998. Second, at Nanyang University of Technology, Singapore, two communication research students, both Chinese women, met with myself on 22nd July, 1998. Finally, four Malay students (two female, two male) in broadcasting or public relations at University Technology Mara, Kuala Lumpur discussed these *Titanic* pages on 2nd January 1999.

In the second stage of investigating audience reception of cinematic web pages, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* was chosen as the subject of participant discussion. Four focus groups were organised. At the Melaka campus of University Technology Mara, four Malay media studies students (three male, one female) discussed the film and associated internext text with the Caucasian author of this paper on 12th August 1999. Three days later, two further focus groups were held on the Shah Alam campus of the same university (both involved two male and one female communication studies Malay undergraduates). One of these discussions was moderated by this paper's Chinese co-author. Finally, on 4th December 1999 a group involving four Chinese students (two female, two male) was convened by Winny Liew in her home town (Kampar, Perak).²

Contributors were asked to discuss their comprehension of the visual texts displayed to them, to consider their level of involvement and identification (or distanced criticism). We also reflected with participants on their view of the relationship between film and web site, and the contribution of each to the other.
(3) **Consuming 'Play'**

Play is a basic human activity. The idea of 'play' is logically fundamental or irreducible, 'resisting any attempt to reduce it to other terms' (Huizinga, 1970: 25). Setting aside the material and mundane, people access net content. Ideas associated with 'play' can be used to explore many aspects of users responding to the internet, their cognitive and physical behaviour in constructing meaning on-line. Concluding their 'mutual interaction' (Livingstone, 1999: 100) with this medium, their playful involvement in its texts ends with users disengaging, returning to everyday life.

### i. Going On-Line as Cognitive Absence

Going on-line, like play, stands 'outside "ordinary" life' (Huizinga, 1970: 32). Surfing on the world-wide-web (at least for the moment) is considered a special experience, involving a certain absence from the everyday. Sampling the internet can approximate the nirvana of nightly watching television, of being able to 'empty your head of all the thoughts you have had all day long' [audience contribution in Hoijer (1999)]. As a focus group contributor (Malay, male) argued, like cinema-going, it 'suits the needs' of the audience for escape. Concerning oneself with 'the virtual' involves a more or less prolonged renunciation of activities usually perceived as more mundane. It is to 'be in the world, but not of it' (Silverstone, 1999: 59).

Accessing the web, as with play, is 'essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life' (Caillois, 1961: 6). While for the few, casually connecting (expensively) on-line from mobile phones is a part of everyday activity, most of us need to 'move across a threshold' (Silverstone, 1999: 60), enter an internet cafe, or an office space, to gain planned access to the virtual. Internet use, like play is 'circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance' (Caillois, 1961: 9).

Contributors to our focus groups considered involvement in media content could be heightened through discussion, a 'mouth to mouth thing!' (Chinese male) Talking in a Titanic chat room, one is doubly removed from everyday life, both on-line and absorbed-in-the-film. 'You're involved in the movie. Quite good!' (Chinese student) Gaining an interest in virtual terrain is encouraged by on-screen interactive icons: 'I think it's much more interesting if (....) you can click on the map itself', 'like I feel I'm in there you know' (Chinese women).
Going On-Line as Holistic

Cinema spectators seek sense on the screen. Focussed on achieving coherent comprehension, 'some audiences prefer to know the ending of the story before going into the movie' (Malay, male). The 'quality of the movie' can rest, they'd suggest, not on its enigmas, but on the way the director 'puts the sequences of the film, arranges the sequence' (Malay, female) supporting a straightforward understanding of content.

Likewise, accessing web pages, users try to reach an integrated account of their content. Desirous of a text's meaning in its entirety, they set out to achieve holistic understanding. Audiences attempt to establish coherent sense in a play-like 'back-and-forth movement' (Hans, 1980: 315) of textual interpretation, setting their understanding of parts of a page in the context of its perceived meaning as a whole.

'As readers construct the main ideas from the bits and pieces of meaning they encounter in text, they also reflect on and respond to these constructions, modifying them when information in the text is inconsistent with the emerging macroproposition' (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995: 100).

This pattern of cognitive activity defines the hermeneutic circle of understanding texts, of producing holistic (or overall) sense from particular script and images seen on-line. Sometimes, failure occurs: 'in a nutshell, I don't find the whole movie makes sense at all' (Malay, male). Attempts to comprehend clash with apparent contradictions: 'something that didn't make sense is when (...) they say that that man is dead, but when they want to throw the man into the river, the man is still alive' (Malay woman discussing I Know What You Did Last Summer).

Elsewhere, resorting to constructing a narrative can provide viewers with a basis for establishing a coherent page. 'Readers report that they do reflect on how pieces of information across text fit together, that they juggle various pieces of meaning to create a larger meaning' (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995: 54). Moving from part to whole, noting how detailed content is contributing meaning to a home page, allows internet users to go about 'forging for themselves a meaning making space' (Champ, 1999: 4).
Likewise, readers' sense of the broader meaning of a text influences their interpretation of particular elements. The hypothesized macrostructure is a powerful contextual determinant of the meaning of specific information encountered in text after the macrostructural hypothesis is formulated (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995: 55). Here, references to on-line authorship can appear, suggesting varied complex content to have a single, unifying source.

Where users are finding difficulty in comprehending internet pages (cross-culturally or otherwise), they can attempt via various routes to bring their cultural capital to bear upon web content. Discussing in focus groups, for instance, they may consider alternative accounts of pages [in 'multiple-descriptive relational metatalk' (Lee, 1997: 219)]. Here, the hermeneutic goal of producing a coherent interpretation is sustained, allowing readers where successful to 'share a small portion' (ibid.) of insights with internet authors.

Ordering content, establishing understanding of a web site is assisted where its pages are 'quite clean', 'not crowded', 'plain', 'very organised' (Chinese female), 'spacious' (Chinese male). On the other hand, pages can resist the reader's interpretative play where they are 'very blur' (Chinese male), 'all cramped' (Chinese male), 'too cluttered' (Chinese women). A recipient's age is seen as affecting his or her evaluation of hermeneutic clarity: 'targeting to older people ( ...) just get straight to the point and then just make it simple' (Chinese male).

Words on a page may be ignored by readers, in favour of a hermeneutic concentration on interpreting images: we 'don't spend so much time for reading text' (Chinese male). Sometimes, because of costly on-line access or limited time, interpretation is narrowly focussed: I 'just flip through and just go for the main point that I want' (Chinese, male). Often, a detailed understanding is relinquished in favour of taking a hypertext link to another site. On the other hand, for one of our contributors, the ideal 'movie web site' would be epistemically self-contained, rendering unnecessary the need to 'commute' to others: 'Hey! 80% of the information is contained inside there!' (Chinese, male)
iii. Going On-Line as Teleological

Cinema spectators seek sense on screen, projecting particular interpretations of a film. Yet sometimes 'you can't expect what will happen' (Malay, male). Audiences strive after meaning as their goal, the telos of their hermeneutic endeavour. 'I'm pretty sure that everyone has the same problem the first time they watch this film (I Know What You Did Last Summer), they keep wondering who's the killer.' 'I did have a problem to guess who is the killer', 'we try to anticipate his next move throughout the movie' (Malays, male).

Likewise, internet audiences aim at establishing intelligible web pages, testing conjectures against their reading of content, competing against incoherence. They speculate and subsequently scrutinize their hypotheses about likely meaning, checking their 'assumption about the picture is correct' (Malay, female). Telling stories, web pages can set up a question. Readers' conjectures about possible narrative developments 'have the status of hypotheses, which are either confirmed or disconfirmed by subsequent text' (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995: 51).

The cognitive play of consuming on-line texts is in constant motion between anticipating content and subsequently verifying (and possibly rejecting) conjecture. Speculation can lead people astray: "mistakes" (or "miscues") in reading are often the result of quite logical, if ultimately mistaken, predictions' (Buckingham, 1988: 37).

That watching the web can be described as 'play-like' here points (in phenomenological terms) to its teleological 'intentionality'. Web users, that is, are continually striving to attain new meaning, to 'project' and discover sense. 'Readers often make inferences to fill in meaning gaps in text' (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995: 49).

As in playing a game, viewers exert themselves to achieve the creative 'goal' of understanding - an internet or filmic text. Web pages can 'top up' (Malay, male) the meaning of a narrative on the big screen, assisting audiences to compile a story. Alternatively, responding to elliptical 'narrative images' merely giving an 'impression of the movie' (Malay, male) on a cinema-related web site, audiences may wish to view the film itself with the hermeneutic ambition of discerning its story more fully.
Whether consuming cinema or internet, the teleological moment or aspect
of the cognitive play involved imports an individualistic 'element of tension'
(Huizinga, 1970: 29) to reading, 'a striving to decide the issue and so end it'
(ibid.). Seeking a determinate meaning, 'the player wants something to "go", to
"come off"; he (sic) wants to "succeed" by his own exertions' (ibid.).

iv. Going On-Line as Freedom

No-one can be compelled to play, to be dutifully ludic. Such forced
activity could hardly be considered a freedom-embracing escape from the mundane
(i): it would be work. The 'player devotes himself (sic) spontaneously to the game,
of his free will and for his pleasure' (Caillois, 1961: 6). Playing 'is not obligatory;
if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion' (ibid.,
9). Cinema going is joyous diversion, playfully pre-occupying oneself in free time.

Accessing the internet reluctantly, perhaps required to do so by professional demands, is play-like in being concerned to establish an intelligible content (ii), (iii). But it is hardly ludic liberation. On the other hand, where internet users go freely and enthusiastically into the unknown on-line, escape is celebrated energetically, with players engaging in the 'most absorbing, exhausting game in order to find diversion, escape from responsibility and routine' (ibid., 6).

Going on-line celebrates freedom of the will, of course, only amongst the comparatively privileged few. In developing countries, or for the poor of developed nations, freedom to play electronically is curtailed. Accessing the world-wide-web is intelligible as 'play', as a ludic opportunity, presently available only to limited socio-economic groups (Anyawu, 1999: 3).

v. Going On-Line as Indeterminate

Playing a game is essentially unpredictable in its result, as are the epistemological consequences of going on-line to access limitless hypertext. 'An outcome known in advance, with no possibility of error or surprise, clearly leading to an inescapable result, is incompatible with the nature of play. Constant and unpredictable definitions of the situation are necessary' (Caillois, 1961: 7-8).
In play, as during a game, the result is essentially undecided, not 'fixed'. Likewise, while those accessing web pages strive to discern the meaning of a text, they are invariably forced to leave open its ultimate determination, to postpone a conclusion. Understanding is always available for amendment, continually straying from the merely local. Presented to the reader at every turn, hypertext links to associated web content defer the possibility of finally establishing sense and significance.

Confronted with on-line media, audience understanding is reluctantly non-totalising. Meaning is continually that which has yet to be secured. Content accessed on the internet lacks the relative closure associated with traditional texts like those found in television series, with 'narrative forms which posit a resolution', material 'organized towards a particular conclusion' (Ellis, 1999: 64). Instead, people responding to content on-line themselves require an 'openness, this willingness to let the conversation go where it will' (Hans, 1981: 12).

If playing games and accessing the internet are liberating for those involved (iv), routine cannot be imposed on this activity: 'some latitude for innovations' must necessarily be 'left to the player's initiative' (Caillous, 1961: 9). In respect both of winners of games and web content, 'doubt must remain until the end, and hinges upon the denouement' (ibid., 7).

While play strives to determine meaning (iii), it is equally an experience of indeterminacy, of acknowledging the unknown. Such openness on the part of those voyaging the internet implies 'risk', a 'willingness to forego one's own territory' (Hans, 1981). Surfing may disorientate people accessing web pages. Voyaging far from home can prove epistemologically challenging. The primary criterion for play' is 'openness', though 'openness does not mean a lack of orientation - it only means a willingness to put that orientation into question' (ibid).

vi. Going On-Line as Serious

Using the world-wide-web is a pleasurable release from mundane demands or 'fun' (i). Narrative images on-line support audience escapism previously associated with a cinema-outing or watching television. Yet, as in a game or 'temporary world circumscribed by play' (Huizinga, 1970: 30), the ludic is also rule-governed and is thereby 'very serious indeed' (ibid., 24).
Here, Caillois agrees: a 'game with rules seems in certain circumstances like a serious activity' (1961: 9). Going on-line, commencing virtual play, is a significant commitment to follow a particular practice. All 'play, both of children and of grown-ups, can be performed in the most perfect seriousness', since the 'rules of a game are absolutely binding and allow no doubt' (Huizinga, 1970: 37, 30).

Accessing the internet similarly has its protocol and principles. Both going on-line and play are characterised by 'precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules that must be accepted as such and that govern the correct playing of the game' (Caillois, 1961: 7), 'conventions that suspend ordinary laws' (ibid., 10). Web use requires recognition of necessary on-line regulating ritual.

Accessing the internet, then, is in a range of ways 'play-full' or ludic. Different types of internet content offer those who access them alternative possibilities of play - of absenting oneself from mundane reality, of estimating likely meaning, of confronting the uncertain, and so on. These varying modes of ludic response to internet content [or 'rubrics' of audience play (Caillois, 1961: 12)] can be articulated as a reception theory of web genres.

(4) **Playfully Accessing Web Genres**

Player-readers of the web involve themselves enjoyably in pages on-line, with internet sites viewed as sources of more or less coherent meaning. Web pages are classified generically by their authors or audiences as possessing a type of content produced through a process specifiable in general terms (eg. 'official'), promoting predictable forms of ludic engagement on the internet or elsewhere. Featured on their distinctive web-pages, for instance, the bizarre images associated with the generic collection of 'teenage horror flicks' (Malay, male) *Scream, Scream 2*, and *Scream 3* encourage assumptions amongst those intending to see these films about being able to play at being afraid, pleasurably threatened by 'horrifying' events unfolding on screen.

A *Titanic*-related home page was categorised in generic terms by focus group participants as the 'true website, the official website. I mean the real official website' (a male Malay student). Site content (eg. story-bearing images) could be read as typically found in pages resourced by the public relations sector of the...
entertainment industry - to 'create some hype' (a male Chinese student). Viewer-visitors to the Titanic site are intended to playfully celebrate the film.

Extending the hermeneutic circle of their interpretative understanding from its focus on the website to include the film itself, one of the Singaporean Chinese women students shed further light on the images used in the 'official' authoring of the page by the 'movie company':

'It looks very much like what you see at the cinema or TV or publicity posters, you know. These posters are so widely seen. All over Singapore when Titanic was being shown, you see now still. ( ...) Put up by the movie company that is creating Titanic.'

The industrial source of the home page suggested its interpretation would be unproblematic. 'It's a real page', 'very well designed', asserted the other Singaporean student. The site's generic identity heightened expectations about ease of comprehension, about swiftly integrating content within a hermeneutic circle of understanding.

i. Generic Forms of Audience Absence

Web genres, like their filmic and televisual counterparts, permit those accessing them to be cognitively absent from everyday life. Sites 'integrate the audience by proposing particular roles for them within its texts' (Shaner, 1999), comprehending content, consenting to points-of-view. These blandishments to join the virtual can be vigorously resisted. For some of those in our focus groups, protesting against permissiveness, seeking moral distance from the effects of globalisation (perceived as pernicious), 'global modernity, in its massifying, centralising moment, is destructive of real localities' (Tomlinson, 1999: 108). The Western teenagers in I Know What You Did Last Summer were 'free to do anything they want, freedom of expression that means, and they are very materialistic, very individualistic, very self-centred' (Malay, male).

Generally, web pages enable imaginative play 'elsewhere' for users otherwise required to be socially present in the many roles of a more mundane existence. Genres collude differently in their readers' ludic attention to a screen, in their having fun. Surfing through a magazine on-line is distinct from sharing a fan's obsession with a movie.
People's passing commitment to watching film, television or web page involves a playful cognitive absence, a temporary negating of everyday life, 'an interlude in the day' (Stephenson, 1988: 46). Gazing at a screen or intermittently showing 'discontinuous attention' (Ellis, 1999: 68), one forgets less than splendid surroundings as if becoming absorbed by a game. Everyday events drift to the margins of audience awareness. 'Play fulfils its purpose only if the player loses himself (sic) in his play' (Gadamer, 1975: 92). Nevertheless, such self-forgetfulness is not permanent, for characteristically, watching television or computer in a domestic space, one is continually subject to interruption. Internet users yield to more mundane distractions, turning away from the screen, reverting to a socially immersed identity.

ii. Generic Integration of Content

Classification of web content according to genre assists in attaining a coherent understanding by establishing it as instantiating a type of story (and production). Users draw on their 'knowledge of the usual structure and content of the genre being read in order to understand the meaning of text' (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995: 53).

Narrowcast on the internet, the 1997 'IBM Chess Challenge rematch between the computer known as Deep Blue and Gary Kasparov' exemplified the 'television-based' (Shaner, 1999) entertainment genre of 'live events' on-line. Reference to the genre in identifying this virtual spectacle defines it as characteristic of 'entertaining events' specially staged for the small screen, with presenter and packaging emphasising its 'live' mode of production. More widely, knowledge of the type of narrative and authorial source involved acts as a rallying point for readers establishing an intelligible subject matter for a story, signalling appropriate horizons of understanding its content.

An audience's hermeneutic, or interpretative, 'circle of understanding' content integrates segments within a web page as sharing a single authorship. Likewise, an appeal to its narrative structure can bring coherence to an otherwise fragmented discourse. From the perspective of an internet user's ludic perception of meaningful content as generic, even tentative awareness of web page writers and type of stories involved is pivotal. For the generic classification which is made possible can offer a reference point enabling readers to begin securing an ordered text. Author and narrative are sources of hermeneutic clarity on screen.
Genres can equally be anticipated to inhibit coherent readings, to present difficulties in competently constructing meaning on-line (vi). As an amateur site, a Titanic-related home page was expected to have content less than straightforwardly intelligible. While the on-line author was 'experienced in creating home pages', this was a 'congested' 'fan home page' using Geocities. Agreeing on the gender of the source, the two Singaporean women participants in this study continued: 'he's trying to show off how many (links?) he already has', 'throw everything he has into the home page'.

The web site created by this Titanic fan was 'cluttered', claimed one of the Malaysian Chinese women participants: its parts resisted unifying integration within an overall idea of the whole. More space 'makes reading easier', less 'blur'.

iii. Generic Projection of Meaning

Identifying a film's generic membership establishes a horizon of audience expectations within which the text is subsequently experienced. Narrative development is rendered 'expectable': 'without seeing the whole movie, you can decide the way the movie in going, we sort of know the ending' (Malay, male). Likewise, determining a web page's generic membership associates it with a 'body of textual conventions', and consequently cultivates amongst audiences 'a set of expectations' (Neale, 1980: 51) about its likely content.

Citing Alloway (1971), Hutchings suggests genres are 'iconographical groupings' (1995: 64) featuring 'recurrent character types and situations' 'familiar to the audience through repetition' (ibid.). Generic knowledge of an internet site as an on-line music source, for instance, supports viewers' anticipation both of a certain narrative content on screen and how they may go about discerning its meaning.

'For the first time when you see this movie (I Know What You Did Last Summer) you might be confused' (Malay, woman). In the case of some spectators, cinema like Titanic can be 'beyond their expectations' (Chinese, female). But films and web-sites serve to illuminate each other. 'Sometimes when movie-goers become clueless at the cinema', information available on-line allows an accurate projection of film content, rescuing 'a better understanding about the whole movie'. 'I will come and try to get to know more about what I know about I Know What You Did Last Summer' (Malay, male). A Malaysian Chinese female participant suggested that web page pictures (or, one might say, their mise-en-scene)
particularly encourage audience anticipation of a film’s narrative development, ‘you can really imagine’. Alternatively, looking first at the enigmatic *I Know What You Did Last Summer* web page images, ‘movie goers will be compelled to go and really find out what is actually going on’ (Malay, male) and visit the cinema.

Considering home pages as instantiating genres assists navigation on the net. For knowledge of generic membership supports users in expecting likely hypertext, ‘the relational aspect of computer interaction’ (Shaner, 1998). Official movie sites will probably connect to star biographies, interviews with the director, and so on. Hypertext links are the web’s distinctive modes of managing information flow and how it is accessed by audiences. Text-embedded connections typically surrounding the strategic use of hyperlinks' (ibid.), enable users to follow particular navigational routes appropriate to a genre.

iv. **Generic Forms of Freedom**

‘Where Do You Want To Go Today?’ Microsoft’s inquiry of those intent on exploring the internet evokes the (apparent) freedom of choice which can be exercised in accessing pages on the world-wide-web. Once on-line, different genres offer alternative experiences of liberty, of detachment from everyday chores (eg. internet CD-Rom ‘music stores’). Recognising audience selectivity, film-related web pages further support their readers in anticipating particular forms of freedom, in ‘eagerly awaiting’ (Malay, female) the arrival of their choice of cinema-associated escapism.

Exercising this pleasurable freedom to choose/ freedom from the dutiful mundane, is ‘fun’ (Huizinga, 1970: 43). As in play, accessing the virtual is a ‘stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of expressive activity with a disposition all of its own’ (ibid., 26). Internet surfing, like the ludic, absorbs ‘the player intensely and utterly’ (ibid., 32), for play is an ‘intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives’ (ibid., 27).

Western cinema and its related web-pages may be read by Asian groups as celebrating freedom of choice to excess. The teenagers in *I Know What You Did Last Summer* were ‘too free - whatever you want - without any restriction’ (Malay, male).
v. Generic Uncertainty

Generic membership determines possible web content, likely discoveries by users (e.g., statistical information on a corporate page rather than film extracts on a fan site). But elucidating a site's genre also suggests uncertainties likely to be encountered by those immersed in pages setting out its subject matter (a music page may prompt doubts about the quality of a CD-Rom on offer).

Internet genres are hardly separate from those of other media. Looking at I Know What You Did Last Summer's web pages, 'the faces show the audience that this movie is full of suspense' (Malay woman). Visually, sites with content derived from the cinema's horror, detective or science fiction genres can heighten a user's sense of uncertainty in encounters with the internet, accentuating the uncanny with their awesome images.

Indeterminate narratives are likely to become the subject of continued hermeneutic speculation by those visiting a site. Hyperlinks to unanticipated content can be challenging, even threatening to readers. Fan sites flourish possibilities of unpredictable discovery markedly different from corporate home pages. Perpetually hyperlinked, the web is endlessly open.

vi. Generic Rules of Serious Play

To enjoy screen content is to celebrate a rule-governed cognitively rich release from everyday life. Pleasurable distraction is on offer to those who, engaging with internet media, seek coherence and intelligibility in a subject matter with which they can identify. Genres offer different possibilities of seriously thoughtful fun.

Realising web pages belong to a particular genre establishes a horizon of expectations amongst those who visit about likely content (e.g., associated with fan sites). Users can anticipate their rule-governed involvement, how they may become pleasurably absorbed (or otherwise) in structuring information of interest, projecting and assessing likely narratives.
Identification: Sharing the Experience of Playing

I have offered above a phenomenology (classifying experience in fundamental categories) of encountering texts as 'play'. Audience responses to web content revolve around internet users' ludic construction of textual meaning along generic lines. Viewers' more or less continuous engagement in cognitive play is a rich reservoir of potential identification with web authors similarly thinking through topics.

The 'temporal acceleration' (Berland, 1997: 76) characterising internet-conveyed content eases users into alignment with those on-line, 'closing cultural and moral distance and providing a compelling sense of involvement with distant lives and events' (Tomlinson, 1999: 172). Speed of communication softens the differences associated with spatial separation, apparently 're-embedding (those on-line) in local contexts' (Livingstone, 1999: 99).

The 'sense of instanciation and immediacy' (Featherstone, 1995: 117) associated with electronic access means that, for instance, those in chat rooms can forget they are far away from those with whom they are 'talking', enjoying instead a 'psychological neighbourhood' (ibid). After experiencing both Titanic and its presence on-line, 'you really feel along the emotion in that movie', 'in their shoes' (Chinese, female). There is an emerging 'sense that the world is a single place' (Featherstone, 1995: 88). Intimacy transcends distance, encouraging identification. This 'stretching of relations across time and space' (Tomlinson, 1999: 107) relegates material reality to the margins of user awareness. Internet content is deterritorialised, with those on-line celebrating a 'death of distance' (Cuilenburg, 1999: 11).

Comparing the internet to earlier dominant media, the capacity of its images to simulate reality (constructing a so-called 'virtual reality') generates user identification in ways distinct from cinema. One of the sites participants discussed, Omni on-line magazine's 'Virtual Titanic A Walking Tour in Cyberspace', invited viewers to look around a virtual replica of the ship, digitally controlling the direction of their gaze with mouse or touchpad. Contributors to my Singaporean focus group were enthusiastic about the potential for audience identification with the film's subjects which lay with such interactive explorations of computer-generated space. 'So, this really, actually gives you first hand understanding of what people think ( ... ) a very real ... sense of the place'. In constructing a virtual reality on-line (a digital version of the 'actual ship itself'), web pages open the
opportunity to those who access them of ersatz experience, of cultivating a 'virtual self' (Chinese male) enabling identification with those who sailed on Titanic.

Identification with another, a momentary or more prolonged alignment with him or her in comprehending the world, celebrates shared experience, that other recognised as like oneself. 'Clearly, many media images concern the representation of that for which we have personal, located experiences: their significance may thus be understood through processes of recognition, validation and reinforcement' (Livingstone, 1999: 96-97).

The shared experience of engaging in hermeneutic play, established in the different moments of coming to understand a text, is one common focus of identification between those in front of/ on the screen. There are, of course, a multitude of other bases on which audiences align themselves with people on web pages, adopting their interpretations of experience, agreeing to prescriptions for conduct and persuasion about the world ['in a nutshell, the movie tells us "What you give, you get back"' (male, Malay)]. Identification's comprehension and consensus, its cognitive play, brings meaning home to audience lives: 'in play we can and do claim something of our individuality, constructing identities through the roles we take and the rules we follow' (Silverstone, 1999: 66).

From a hermeneutic perspective, audiences, abstracting themselves from everyday life, align themselves with television characters in speculating on textual content. Viewers 'solve' crimes along with 'private eyes'. Enjoying serious fun, they appropriate these subjects' social roles on screen. Audiences position themselves with those in programmes, joining in their cognitive play of establishing coherent, continuous meaning, as in the shared understanding of how a game is progressing amongst those involved in securing victory.3

Likewise, mapping out distinctive routes for users' consumption of knowledge, internet genres support those who navigate their way around hypertext in identifying with web content. Player - surfers move in and out of alignment with those represented on-line, for the internet 'is a means of realising relationships' (Shaner, 1999). Their doing so is a response to web pages (or their authors) following the practice of earlier media, attempting to 'create the illusion of intimacy and relationship with the viewer' (Sutton-Smith, 1988: xv). A site's author can speak directly to those who read it.
'Play is an "as-if" culture par excellence' (Silverstone, 1999: 60). Web surfing treats the virtual temporarily as the world, with internet users resting occasionally to share the roles of empathetic souls they find on-line. On these occasions, as elsewhere, one's identification is counterfactual, manifesting its essential playfulness in aligning with another (who one, by definition, is not). For there are games such as 'playing with dolls, playing soldiers, cops and robbers, horses, locomotives and airplanes', 'the chief attraction of which lies in the pleasure of playing a role, of acting as if one were someone or something else' (Caillois, 1961: 8). Here, as in accessing the internet, play is 'accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life' (ibid., 10).

(6) **Distanced Play:**

**Criticism and Consciousness of Computer-Mediation**

Web pages invite particular audiences to play, addressing them with familiarity, offering them recognition. Sometimes those accessing a site enthusiastically 'subscribe' (eg. by filling in on-line forms). More often, in identifying with content, readers simply pause, experiencing psychic proximity to others authoring meaning on screen. Like the ludic more generally, people's involvement will be generic in character, dependent on the type of text concerned.

Inevitably, as with other media, audience alignment can give way to assertions of alienation. A 'huge gap' (Malay, female) was claimed between Hollywood and Malaysian cinema. As students 'we are so different' to 'the American teenagers' (Malay, female), 'physically and mentally, culturally' (Malays, male).

Looking at the film and internet images associated with I Know What You Did Last Summer, Malay undergraduates (male) asserted confidently, 'the way of their life is very different with our country, with our teenagers here', 'such as having sex. well, we don't have it here'. 'It's not really our culture, right, more like American culture, this urban legend thing about killers who cut down all these teenagers who have premature sex.' Firmly drawing boundaries, they defined Malaysian national identity in opposition to the West.

'The result of the growing intensity of contact and communication between nation-states and other agencies is to produce a clashing of cultures, which can lead to heightened attempts to draw the boundaries
between the self and others', 'provoking reactions that seek to
rediscover particularity, localism and difference'. (Featherstone, 1995:
114)

Moreover, computers are limited as 'interpretive vehicles for
comprehending the world' (Green, 1997: 68). On-line identification is continually
qualified for internet users by their awareness of the machinery enabling internet
access. A successful story involves its audiences. But unlike watching a film, to
read hypertext is not to lose oneself in an uninterrupted flow of images. While
television may offer an apparently transparent access to 'reality' for those who
don't notice its editing, the practices whereby hypertext mediates consumer access
to content are never long forgotten.

Selection of screens, use of hypertext buttons to redirect a search,
completing electronic forms before entry is permitted to a new domain, all enforce
the audience's consciousness of digital text as text. Distinctive modes of visual
selection are on display throughout the process of reading, reminding viewers
continuously of their epistemic status as producers of textual meaning from a 'grid
of indeterminacy' (Hulsbus, 1997: 31). Watching the web, a reflexive heightened
self-awareness, albeit engrossed, of reading a screen alternates with the
continuously transparent looking at content associated with earlier media. 5

Conclusion

The internet complicates media experience, and consequently how its use
is theorised. I've been suggesting that web pages can be classified as generic,
promising intended audiences distinct opportunities for play. Focus group
responses suggest that users themselves have developed informed horizons of
anticipating internet content, generic expectations.

Using the internet is a human experience with many playful aspects.
Surfing on the web disrupts categories. Considered 'serious fun' (i. + vi. above), it
draws on cognitive antinomies (or conflicting aspects) of play. Looking backwards
both at philosophies of the 'ludic' and at methodologies for engaging in the study
of earlier media, I've attempted to outline a future possible analytical perspective on
web access.
Notes

1. Caillois (1961) distinguishes between forms of play on the basis of whether ‘the role of competition, chance, simulation or vertigo is dominant’ (12). Here, I have chosen to emphasise (‘competitive’) game-playing as the fundamental metaphor in exploring use of the computer.

Nevertheless, acting on the stage, the playing of a dramatic part or ‘simulation’, involves similar cognitive requirements to those of taking part in sport and might equally be used in analysing internet-use: a willingness to absent oneself from everyday life, a concern to establish intelligibility, an enjoyment of creative freedom, toleration of uncertainty, and a capacity to follow rules. Indeed, Laurel (1991) in writing of computer-user interaction, has explored the theatrical analogy.

Caillois’ two other categories of play, games involving ‘chance’ (eg. ‘roulette or a lottery’) and ‘vertigo’ [‘a rapid whirling or falling movement, a state of dizziness and disorder’ (1961, 12)] can clearly also function as fruitful metaphors in exploring the experience of going on-line.

2. Analysis of focus group discourse is still in progress, to determine whether the phenomenology of playfully accessing the web advanced in this article is a valid account of user experience (resists falsification). The present paper contains no contributions from one of the University Technology Mara (Shah Alam) groups, nor from the Kampar discussion. At the time of writing, a final group is being planned in a Chinese college (Kuala Lumpur). This will bring the total number of participants taking part in the research to thirty-three, half Chinese and half Malay.

3. A point made by Winny Liew in discussing the present theorising of the audience.

4. This distinction between Asian and Western sexual ethics was questioned by two Malay woman undergraduates: ‘I think that (permissive) culture has come in Malaysia’, ‘we catch up’, ‘you can see these problems everywhere.’ These focus groups cannot easily be read as maintaining a harmonious front in the face of a foreigner, Tony Wilson.

5. Colleagues at a University of Sunderland seminar in England suggested audience experience of different forms of new media narrowcasting was in important respects similar in quality, continuous in ‘tone’ irrespective of the
particular technology involved. Viewers, for instance, 'surfed' across multiple television channels, within and between audio-visual narratives on CD-roms and recorded videos, as well as when accessing the internet.

The skills of electronic surfing may require users to exercise a 'dual consciousness' (fluctuating in their focus on accessing the screen), continually switching from being engrossed with content to awareness of the human-machine interactions required to sustain that pleasure in play. If so, earlier oppositions between 'transparent' and 'mediated' access (eg. to television content) require reworking.

References

Hutchings, P. (1995) 'Genre Theory and Criticism', pp. 59-77 in Hollows and Jancovich (eds), Approaches to Popular Film.
INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGIES & INFORMATIVE MEDIA

By:

Robert Chua
Kent Ridge Digital Lab
Singapore

Vincent Lowe
Telekoms Multimedia
Malaysia

Moo Swee Ngoh
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore