

Come Together, Right Now: We Know Something's Happening, But We Don't Know What It Is

Henry Jenkins, **Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide**, New York University Press, 2006, 308 pp, \$29.95 (hardback).

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Ironically, given its title and theme, Henry Jenkins' newest book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, offers a maddeningly divergent range of ideas, arguments and anecdotes, without ever converging on a single point or conclusion. The book aspires at various junctures to cultural theory, techno-futurism, media criticism, subcultural anthropology, sociopolitical advocacy, and (perhaps most effectively, if most surprisingly) 21st century marketing manifesto. Unfortunately, the whole amounts to something less than the sum of its parts; despite many engaging passages, presented in Jenkins' typically accessible and entertaining prose style, not one of these many germs of an idea comes to full fruition.

"Convergence" is a term Jenkins chooses to join the many disparate strands of his argument within a single thematic framework. It is intended to cover a lot of ground:

[C]onvergence represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture. (243)

In other words, Jenkins draws a loose analogy between contemporary changes in media aesthetics, communication infrastructure, organizational logic, media consumption habits, and the balance of cultural power. While his argument leaves little doubt that each of these changes is, in fact, taking place, what's missing is the connective tissue – some kind of hypothetical mechanism tying them all together. We must ultimately take it on faith that these events are somehow united by the *geist* of convergence.

Strangely, the only thing the term "convergence" doesn't seem to mean in Jenkins' book is what it's usually meant to describe in media and technology circles: the utopian dream that today's chaotic and often redundant array of communication technologies will someday coalesce into an elegant and all-encompassing singularity, a monolithic medium for every kind of message. Jenkins quickly dismisses this notion as the "black box fallacy," arguing that "[o]ld media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies" (14).

Shifted to *what* is the question, and Jenkins attempts to answer it over the course of six chapters, each based around a central case study illustrating the ways in which cultural practice, the

media economy, and the political process appear to be changing as a result of innovative and disruptive technologies like the Web, text messaging, video games, blogs and newly accessible multimedia production software. Each of these chapters is in itself a wonderfully self-contained essay, equally entertaining and illuminating, and well worth reading.

Jenkins' treatment of the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix* franchise comprises one of the strongest chapters in the book, and touches upon many of the themes explored elsewhere in it. He argues that this innovative attempt at "transmedia storytelling" (96), in which an ongoing narrative unfolds across three feature films, a series of animated shorts, several video games, as well as novels, comic books and Web sites, is a "flawed experiment" (97) that nonetheless points the way toward both the aesthetic principles and the industrial logic of entertainment in the networked age.

The brilliance of the Wachowski brothers' experiment, Jenkins argues, isn't simply in the extension of a successful film franchise to ancillary products; Walt Disney and George Lucas pioneered these strategies a long time ago in a far, far different media environment. Their contribution comes with the realization that there are no longer any ancillary products; every new medium adds a new piece to the puzzle, hinting at a whole greater than the sum of its parts. As Jenkins explains, "more and more, storytelling has become the art of world building" (114).

This new paradigm offers a win/win/win proposition to creators, audiences and the entertainment industry alike, Jenkins argues. Artists benefit from their newfound freedom to explore and express every facet of the worlds they imagine in full, with a range of tools at their disposal – a possibility only hinted at in the works of Joyce, Faulkner or Picasso. Audiences benefit from leveraging their newfound collective intelligence, based around the online "ad hoc" (251) and fan communities previously explored by McGonigal [2003], Doctorow [2003], and Jenkins [1991] himself. Finally, media corporations benefit from an art form that reflects and exploits the "economic logic of a horizontally integrated entertainment industry" (96), producing the benefits of scale and strategic synergies that have been often promised, but rarely recognized, in recent decades.

Of course, Jenkins acknowledges, there are still a few bugs in the system. For artists, it is unclear how far these new freedoms may be extended before chaos reigns supreme. "There has to be a breaking point beyond which franchises cannot be stretched, subplots can't be added, secondary characters can't be identified, and references can't be fully realized," he writes. "We just don't know where it is yet." (127). For audiences, the resulting expectation that they be "active and alert viewer[s]" (227) both giveth and taketh away. Although this new paradigm confers a long-sought agency upon a previously powerless class of individuals, it also raises the bar for participation, potentially widening the gap between information haves and have-nots, the media literate and illiterate. For the entertainment industry, audience agency presents a double-edged sword as well; while these newly empowered viewers are a brand's best evangelists, they are also the least willing to cede ultimate control over a story (and the intellectual property associated therewith) to its ostensibly rightful owners.

This last theme – audience empowerment and its consequences – reverberates throughout the book. Jenkins has the rare privilege of telling the world "I told you so," and he exults in this victory –

especially in Chapter 2, which focuses on “reality” television series *American Idol*, and its most aggressively devoted viewers. As it turns out, the fan fictionists, slash authors and assorted participatory subcultures he has championed for the past two decades are more than just a motley assortment of weirdos and kooks; in the age of TiVo and BitTorrent, they are the media industry’s first, last and only line of defense against extinction.

This is because the fans who invest the most of themselves in a brand and its “emotional capital” (68) are the most likely to stay loyal to it, and the most likely to spread its gospel to others. If control over entertainment distribution has been wrested from the traditional gatekeepers by active consumers armed with “convergent” technologies, the only way advertisers can continue to subsidize the creation of content is by embedding it ever deeper into the content itself. Thus, in this new system of “affective economics,” (this chapter is gleefully rife with marketing buzzwords) the point is to “blur the line between entertainment content and brand messages” (20), rewarding fans for their enthusiasm by increasing their exposure to both.

However, this belated recognition of the value of hardcore fandom within the entertainment industry has its down side as well, making Jenkins’ victory somewhat bittersweet. “Here’s the paradox,” he writes. “To be desired by the networks is to have your tastes commodified” (62). In other words, visibility is a precursor to exploitation. Like an environmentalist who both revels in the discovery of a new Amazonian species and shudders at the thought of its inevitable consequences, Jenkins seems keenly aware that his own proselytizing may have contributed in some small way to the demise of true fan culture.

Perhaps it is this ambivalence, rather than any lack of visionary acuity, that clouds the book and prevents it from becoming a complete work. The tension between Jenkins’ desire to claim his rightful place as a cultural prophet and his apparent apprehension about the consequences of commodification (both his and his subjects’) make the book less than fully convincing as either a guide to marketing and programming or a guided tour of media subcultures. Many of his business-oriented prescriptions, predictions and analyses fall flat (“soon, licensing will give way to what industry insiders are calling ‘co-creation’” (105), and his social advocacy, which is no doubt both genuine and passionate, doesn’t begin to peek through the haze of marketing jargon until nearly page 200.

Then again, maybe the problem resides in the book format itself, rather than its author. Just as the human mind cannot hope to encompass the totality of creation, a single book may be fundamentally inadequate to describe a phenomenon that is defined by the premise of transmedia storytelling. Similarly, a single author cannot hope to communicate the breadth of collective endeavor. “Criticism may have once been a meeting of two minds – the critic and the author,” Jenkins writes, “but now there are multiple authors and multiple critics” (128). If this is correct – and I believe it is – then both Jenkins and I must relinquish any claim to authority, and simply enjoy being part of the fray as the whole of culture converges on these questions.

References

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