

BEYOND DESKTOPS

Small Tech: The Culture of Digital Tools

Edited By Byron Hawk, David M. Rieder, Ollie Oviedo

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Small Tech: The Culture of Digital Tools offers an invaluable, conception-altering, original field guide to the new media landscape beyond the mainframe, the desktop, and the large organizational network. The sixteen essays in the book unwrap the practices and possibilities of a staggering array of small digital technologies imbedded in our everyday lives such as blogs, digital photo manipulation, Dreamweaver, cell phones, blogs, podcasting, PDAs, peer-to-peer technology, 3D games, locative media, virtual reality, wearable augmented reality interfaces, ambient media, and digital sound.

As the editors write, “[T]he next wave of new media studies will need to examine the ecological interrelationships among the virtual space of the Internet, the enclosed space of the installation and the open space of everyday life” (ix). A trend toward technological weightlessness and miniaturization has combined with power distributions “across the system at all levels of scale” (xi). Small tech—termed “handheld culture”—is significant, they claim, because it works on the threshold of the material and the virtual.

After reading this book, one will be convinced that the amateurization of the universe and most of its technologies have succeeded, and wonder why one might have missed it. And the reader will think differently about how one uses a PDA, iPod, cell phone, and other gadgets.

Small Tech avoids the utopic euphoria of so many recent books embracing digitality and digital art. It also manages to skirt the often inaccessible abstractions of cyberlingo and high theory amputated from artistic and political practice that flood many books and articles surveying the digital and the virtual.

Instead, the editors of *Small Tech* have wisely and strategically fashioned a book grounded in the materialities rather than virtualities of digital technologies, aligned with the second generation of digital scholarship that has critiqued the disembodied, ephemeral abstractions of the first generation of theorists. It is a book grounded in the empirical and the experiential from a distributed systems, user-centric point of view where all technologies and all actions are endlessly malleable and shape-shifting.

Small Tech is divided into three sections: traditional software in new ecologies, small tech and cultural contexts, and future technologies and ambient environments. The book includes essays by many distinguished “digerati.” Lev Manovich writes about data visualization

as a new form of problematic abstraction. Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner chart the possibilities of the new digital media ecologies for active transformative social processes. Johanna Drucker describes an ambitious computing project at the University of Virginia called SpecLab that is simultaneously a teaching tool and a space for engagement. Her project called Ivanhoe created a space for humanities games to generate different readings of texts.

Jason Nolan, Steve Mann, and Barry Wellman—major names from the University of Toronto who have blurred the borders between Internet studies, social networks, computing, and performance art—describe their “sousveillance project,” which deploys small technologies to surveil the surveillers. The era of the “neopanopticon,” the authors contend, has accelerated surveillance through the proliferation of environmental intelligence that uses data mining, data input, statistical monitoring, and security applications. They describe various locative media performances in streets, shops, and malls that deploy wearable computer technologies of screens, data processors, and projectors to project data about consumerism in the very places these transactions occur.

Grounded in pedagogy, social activism, and new public spaces for technological/social exchange such as classrooms, malls, and text messages, *Small Tech* offers many treasures, and brain-popping ideas, beyond the big stars of digital art studies. For example, Paul Cesarani probes podcasting, asserting it allows anyone to become their own radio station. Collin Gifford Brooke interrogates the notion of linking as a material relation between texts. Jenny Edbauer Rice contends cell phones are liminal tools that “collapse a distinction between public and private” (95). Teri Rueb, a pioneer in mobilizing global positioning systems in real-time art projects, describes her locative media projects (using technologies in real space for multiple narratives to unfold with participants) such as “Itinerant” and “Drift,” where the body of the participants combines with mobile technologies to create new narrative experiences.

Small Tech is one of those books to rhapsodize about late night in a bar when colleagues say they need help getting a handle on how to think through and teach digital culture. And after reading this book, they will again see their cell phones or their iPods as devices that simply make life less lonely.

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