

**Hawk, Byron, Rieder, David M., and Oviedo, Ollie (Eds.), *Small Tech: The Culture of Digital Tools*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London, 2008. ISBN 978 0 8166 4978 5. xxiii+236pp., AU\$79.95, US\$25.00.**

The 'Small Tech' in the title of this book refers to portable digital tools such as iPods, mobile phones, digital cameras and personal digital assistants (PDAs). This is a little misleading, because although there is plenty of space devoted to such tools, the book goes well beyond a singular focus on such tools, by including many aspects of new media and cyberculture that are either not necessarily 'portable', or at least not discussed in terms of their portability nor indeed their 'smallness'. The editors of the book use the terms 'new media' and 'cyberculture' to refer to the development of two distinct paradigms of academic engagement with new media technologies over the last decade or so, as identified by Lev Manovich (2003). Their main argument, as clearly set out in the introduction, is that these two paradigms or domains are not fluid enough to adequately address rapid changes in digital culture. Thus, 'the 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' (p. ix). In other words, central to the objectives of *Small Tech* is the notion of 'complex ecologies', and the fundamental realisation that new media technologies emerge out of, and into, complex social, cultural and indeed material contexts. Given this rather ambitious agenda, it is not surprising that the book follows a deliberate and necessarily multidisciplinary path, and herein lies both its strength and weakness. Its strength is that it covers a lot of ground in its twenty six chapters, and thus broadly engages with new media technologies in their widest sense. However, this breadth comes at the expense of a clear focus, both in terms of subject matter, and in terms of addressing its audience. The multidisciplinary approach means in this case that some chapters

address a broad interdisciplinary audience and use non-specialised accessible language, while others have a highly specialised focus, complete with specialised technical language.

Especially in the second section, where the chapters are very short (in some cases barely two pages), it is not always easy to follow the intended thread of the section, nor indeed the overall book.

Having said that however, the book is organised in three clearly explained and logical sections, and given its subject matter, the best approach is perhaps to read the book in the bite sized chunks in which it presents its material. Overall then, *Small Tech* is the end result of a rather ambitious project, and as with most projects that attempt to address a major shift, it is not consistently successful at maintaining its focus. However, despite its fragmented nature, there is much worthwhile material here, even if it is somewhat scattered, and ultimately the book provides a rather comprehensive overview of new digital technologies and tools, and their potential applications and implications, whether they are small or not.

## **References**

Manovich, Lev, 2003, 'New Media from Borges to HTML: Introduction', in (eds) N.

Wardrip-Fruin and N. Montfort, *The New Media Reader*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, pp. 13-25.

*Henk Huijser, Learning & Teaching Support Unit/ Public Memory Research Centre,  
University of Southern Queensland*