

# Dissertation Final Public Oral

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# Gadgetry: New Media and the Fictional Imagination

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# Thanks

So many people here have helped me and this document finally get to this place, that I really have to start by thanking some people for their encouragement and attention and pushback and food... everything really.

## Background

I thought I'd talk a little bit about how I came to this topic, and then give you a brief overview of a couple chapters.

When I first conceived of this project, I was interested in the historical recurrence of technological fantasies: projections of future worlds and wondrous possibilities tethered to material shifts in the fabric of the everyday present. It seemed to me that elements of these fantasies lodge themselves in the cultural reception of new media technologies, providing a language by which we can describe and define their contours.

For instance, fantastic stories of physically “jacking in” to cyberspace in the 1980s allowed us to more concretely imagine the decentralized communities of the Internet, just as the figure of the robot became a symbol of automation in the 1940s and 50s.

Similar to research on literary science fiction, my questions would be about the mechanics of this relationship between the real and the imaginary: what elements of the given world are drawn upon, and to what extent must the fantasy resemble the reality for it to work?

## The Argument

So, my first step was to start taking this keyword “gadget” seriously. What initially interested me about the gadget is how the word refers to a concrete object you can hold in your hand and at the same time serves as a placeholder, a stand-in for a tool that has been forgotten, rigged up on the fly, or not yet invented.

Unlike the more dismissive terms “gizmo” or “widget,” which denote insignificant variables with no clear operational value, the gadget is an indeterminate device that is nevertheless fully operable in that it fulfills a particular set of technical and narrative functions. It is an object that lives a curiously double life as both an actual tool and a fictional device.

What makes the gadget an important and understudied topic in the cultural history of media technologies is the fact that its fundamental instrumentality changes from decade to decade.

Though the word “gadget” is a sort of empty container for any object whatsoever, the shape of that container changes drastically from its origins in late nineteenth century nautical jargon to its present-day association with mobile media. The functionality of

# Overview of the Document

## **1 Introduction: Toward a Paleoarchaeology of Media**

- 1.1 Technology and Technique in the Mousterian Debate
- 1.2 Evolution of the Gadget
- 1.3 Epistemological Reverse Engineering
- 1.4 A Hybrid Approach

## **2 From Marlinspike to Mobile Media: On the Etymology of Gadget**

- 2.1 Nautical Origins
- 2.2 Additions and Modifications, Both Homemade and Trivial
- 2.3 Postwar Manufacturing and Production
- 2.4 Objects of Ideology Critique
- 2.5 Mobile Interfaces with Digital Media

## **3 PocketWireless and the Shape of Media to Come**

- 3.1 Speculative Apparatuses
- 3.2 "Call Up Wifey on the 'Stove-Pipe' Radio"
- 3.3 Devices and Plot Devices
- 3.4 The Mechanics of Speculation
- 3.5 Eve's Wireless and the Archaeology of Mobile Media

## **4 The Fictional History of Scientification**

- 4.1 Toward Science Fiction
- 4.2 Everyday Estrangement
- 4.3 Dime Novels, Popular Science, and the Genealogy of Scientification
- 4.4 Functional and Fictional Devices
- 4.5 Postscript: Informal Modernism

## **5 Projecting Martian Photography**

- 5.1 A Point of Light, A Place
- 5.2 Bazin and the Techniques of Technological Discovery
- 5.3 Another World Viewed
- 5.4 Technological Evolution
- 5.5 New Media Disappear

**Epilogue: "The trouble with arm-chair-and-pushbutton-utopias"**

## Conclusions

So that's about it! I don't have much left to say in closing, except for a couple of brief comments on my next steps for this project.

The first involves this stuff with text mining that I showed you.

New methods in the digital humanities allow us to study literature not just as a selective canon of great works, but as an ecosystem or an economy of texts. Now, the tools that I used were pretty rudimentary, compared to some of the analysis being done in other areas of the digital humanities. But for me, something as simple as a keyword search and some visualization software provided me with the ability to construct my object of study from the ground up... that is, the history of the discourse surrounding this word "gadget."

One of the implicit arguments of my opening chapters is that theories of technology and culture should engage more with the explanatory power of digital resources. The influence of digital humanities methodologies has not yet happened among media studies communities in the same way that it has for scholars of literary history. I have a lot more to learn in that area, but this is



# References