PATTERNS OF RECOLLECTION
The Documentary Meets Digital Media

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to propose a conceptual framework for the analysis of historical programming in digital media. Radical breakthroughs in the technologies for registration and dissemination of moving images have created a need for common vocabularies that can be shared by media practitioners, researchers from different fields of inquiry, and end-users of documentary accounts. The elements of the proposed framework are derived from the fields of architecture, genre theory, and computer software design. It adheres to the pattern language approach proposed by Christopher Alexander, a methodology for cooperative design that has been successfully applied in the design of computer software. The study suggests that this method for identifying design elements resonate well with recent contributions to genre theory made by film-scholar Rick Altman and by computer-scientist Thomas Erickson.

The application of the pattern-informed genre framework is demonstrated in a series of explorations that exemplifies documentaries from different periods of production informed by different techniques for research, production, distribution, and exhibition. The examples range from the films of Humphrey Jennings, produced in the 1940's, to current examples of digital documentaries produced and exhibited on the World Wide Web. A collection of forty-three candidate design patterns is identified that characterise the different modes of production and technologies employed. For each example, a small set of characteristic patterns of composition is discussed and some pertinent shifts in practical application of new techniques for recording, editing and navigating are briefly reviewed. The last example demonstrates the application of design patterns as a tool for design dialogues with end-users in an ongoing project at the Centre for User-oriented IT Design (CID, Royal Institute of Technology), a project in which the author has taken an active part.

The hypothesis that pattern languages for documentary analysis and design can offer new practical insights into digital media of moving images is assessed in the concluding part of the study. First, the characteristic patterns identified in the examples are discussed in relation to recent contributions to the design of human-computer interfaces (HCI) and to genre-theory. In respect to such an interdisciplinary application, the study concludes that, although there are definite prospects for the proposed framework to productively interact with neighbouring disciplines, one limitation of the pattern tradition lies in a reluctance to account for conflicting user expectations. In the last chapter, the pattern language method, and an

early technique for motion capture that mimics it, are discussed against the backdrop of a current socio-political analysis made by sociologist Manuel Castells. Here the pattern approach, and chronographic techniques through which it can be applied, are proposed as means for documentary producers to meet critical audience demand for authenticity in history programming.