Andrew Quitmeyer
Statement of Purpose - Digital Media Ph.D.
"Digital Naturalism"

Over the course of my life, I have thoroughly explored the often disparate realms of Science, Mathematics, Engineering, Arts, and Communication. Though I would immerse myself in very specific projects, my catalog of experience dissuaded me from committing my life to any one field. My internship at [adultswim] opened my eyes to the potential of mass media, but its industrial structure fought against research and change. My experience as an engineering consultant taught important lessons concerning design and economic analysis, but it tended to shun originality. While I feel that specialized academic disciplines are necessary for the efficiency of the commercial world, the structural stigmas associated with each field can stifle truly powerful innovation. Instead, I seek to harness the affordances of digital media in order to penetrate and unite academic disciplines as a means of empowering research. This fusion of all arts and sciences via a digital substrate, forms my purpose as a Ph.D. student in a concept I would like to designate, "digital naturalism."

The idea behind "digital naturalism" comes from the practices of early Natural Philosophers who gave birth to the development of modern science. In the first applications of pure empiricism, these men and women, like Boyle, Darwin, and Cavendish, embedded themselves in information rich environments, and used the full spectrum of their education to distill new ideas from the natural world. The methodology behind such generalized experimentation could be considered in three parts, the collection, analysis, and distribution of information, all of which are primed for augmentation by digital means. For example, Darwin voyaged on the HMS Beagle primarily as a geologist, gathering rock samples from around the world, but his outside interests in zoology and art prompted the additional collection of morphological drawings of various animals. After many years of analyzing these tandem data streams, Darwin was able to link the formation of new, isolated islands with the morphological specialization of animal species. Of course, these years of work would have been in vain if he could not aptly describe his research and findings to others. So, he employed his skills as a writer to publish these theories. The point of "digital naturalism" would be to enhance each of the fundamentals of empiricism with the capabilities of digital media. Digitally experimenting with these components, the collection, analysis, and distribution of data, have formed the base of my life's work.

My eagerness to gather data forged my character as a student and researcher. Throughout my education, I pushed myself to take heavy course loads, not to graduate early, but to maximize the variety of subjects I could encounter. I began with standard curricula in the arts and sciences, but I soon became attracted to studies that featured particularly high-bandwidth data streams with many interconnected parameters. To understand these systems, I took up engineering because it offered methods of problem solving and inquiry that could be applied to complex structures, regardless of subject matter. For instance, computer vision piqued my interest early on with its attempts to reveal relationships between torrents of linked temporal, spatial, and color data coming an arbitrary source. Similar reasons prompted my digital work with real-world environments. Locative media and installations, like DWIG's "Ducks Feed People" project and the agricultural design research I experienced in the Public Design Workshop interested me due to the deluge of environmental information that must be considered and analyzed. Also, in these realms of rich data, linking disparate knowledge bases often becomes quite advantageous. My past entomology courses, for example, influence the way I program specific characteristics of my current computer vision bio-tracking programs.

Although I am driven to collect data, sharing knowledge gives me joy. Whenever I encounter fresh experiences, stories, or ideas, it burdens me to keep this new information to myself. This feeling, I now realize, is what forged my roles as filmmaker, artist and educator. Video allowed me to communicate abstruse concepts to others in a fast, accessible format. Whether the subject matter pertained to scientific findings, like the grammar behind the honeybee’s dance language, or more bizarre matters, such as first-hand studies of hobo rail-riding culture, I simply wanted to disseminate information as effectively as possible. When I learned programming and the world of computational media opened up to me, I was thrilled to create and experiment with novel data-dispersal mechanisms that would have been impossible just years before.

However, I became troubled by the fact that the arcane knowledge inherent to film making and digital media created a one-way flow of information. It seemed dangerous that the target consumers of these new media forms tended to be illiterate in creating film and digital media themselves. To stem this imbalance of power, I launched a campaign to teach underprivileged children how to harness these new modes of communication. *The Storytelling Studio* is an all-encompassing, media literacy workshop which teaches children, teens, and families to share their personal stories and ideas through a spectrum of media. Since its inception, my system has enabled individuals across three continents to communicate in new, powerful ways, and it has been used to tackle pressing societal topics such as child labor in Ecuador. The work I did for *The Storytelling Studio*, and its documentary, Behind the Screen, led to my selection as the documentary production instructor for a mixed graduate/undergraduate art history course, “Collecting East Asia.” Now, I am creating a tool for rapid video documentary production with my master’s thesis project, *Documatic*. The project consists of an Android app that uses mobile phones to form a collaborative film production and editing environment, which then automatically generates pre-edited “rough cuts” to Adobe Premiere and Final Cut Pro.

These passions, information’s collection, analysis, and dissemination, have guided me in my work and education and towards my goal as a "digital naturalist." In the same way that the internet is empowering individuals to function on par with massive corporations in the areas of journalism, commerce, and music production, I believe that digital media can empower persons to study and embrace a plethora of academic disciplines with the same efficacy as academic specialists. Georgia Tech's Digital Media Master's program made me proud to be able to cultivate my multifarious knowledgebase of the world. I would be thrilled at the chance to continue my diverse research and explore new adventurous realms in science and media at the Ph.D. level.

Sincerely,
Andrew James Quitmeyer