

New Media Theory Primer¹

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Introduction

New media theory is important to me, as a multimedia developer, as a teacher, and as a researcher. I started this blog [Allecto Reader, see footnote] in part as a means for me to share my thoughts and reactions to the theory I was reading, as well as to promote new media theory, primarily by making it more accessible. My “New Media Theory Primer” is intended to serve as an approachable introduction to the topic. I provide definitions of both new media and new media theory; I attempt to briefly situate and justify the topic as a worthwhile discipline; and above all I try to make it more accessible to those new to the field.

Beyond this introduction, the primer is divided into three parts, as follows:

- Part I: What is New Media Theory?
- Part II: Apologia for New Media Theory
- Part III: How to Read New Media Theory

¹ This document originated as a series of blog entries on my blog, <http://www.allecto.com/blog/>, hence the informal nature of its tone.

Part I. What is New Media Theory?

New media theory is an intellectual discipline that examines the nature, roles, and functioning of new media objects (that is, works) in their cultures. Because “new media” is a fairly new concept, any theoretical discipline dependent on it seems logically as though it ought to be in its infancy, and in some ways, it is. However, as much as new media is an outgrowth of so-called “old media,” and because theories of (old) media have been elaborated for centuries, new media theory is not quite as new as it may seem. In many ways, new media theory is the descendent of such academic disciplines as cinema theory, literary theory, and more broadly critical theory.

I have not yet properly defined what I mean by “media theory.” Thousands, tens of thousands, of books, articles, and letters have been written in response to or providing analysis of various objects of media, from works of literature to the underlying structures of Japanese manga, from the Darwinist politics of reality TV to the representation of women in nineteenth-century Italian opera. As we experience media, we also store memories of that experience, which may range from deeply reflective to shallow and ludic.² Our human brains cannot contain all this experience, both direct and vicarious (via criticism). Instead, we associate ideas we read in one place with ideas we discovered in another. We detect patterns that reveal deep similarities among diverse phenomena, and we let go of our experience/cognition of the phenomena and remember instead these

² “Ludic” derives from the Latin word for “games,” at it is used to describe doing an activity purely (and sometimes compulsively) for the pleasure derived in the activity. It is also related to the word, “ludology,” which is a new term describing the study of video games.

patterns we've discovered. We abstract concepts, classify phenomena, and predict the future. At some point in this process, we cross a line, the line separating the literal phenomena we are examining (words of an epic, notes from a symphony, clips from TV, boss fights from a video game) from the abstract or generalized ideas that we construct and claim (perhaps with some justice) these phenomena are instances of. When we cross that line, we move from experience and even criticism to theory. Theory is a high-level, abstract analytical summary of our own aesthetic/media experiences combined with whatever media criticism we have encountered. Our own theories of media (and we all have them, even if we don't think of them on those terms) are interfaces to the fullness of our experience of media. By studying the media theory of others, we can almost exponentially increase our experience of media, even if only vicariously.

A more difficult matter, perhaps, is where to situate new media studies relative to existing academic disciplines. Many diverse disciplines lay claim to certain aspects of new media: communications (including broadcasting and journalism), fine arts, computer science, the humanities (including literary studies and philosophy), social sciences (including cognitive science and information science), and informatics, among others. This issue reflects the idiosyncrasies of the way the modern university organizes itself, more than it reflects any problem of the discipline of new media studies itself. The truth is, new media both reflects and saturates our culture; its sheer ubiquity guarantees its relevance to a number of fields, both technical and cultural.

Perhaps the best way to introduce an academic discipline is to identify some of the primary questions it asks or issues it examines. The following list of questions is by no means comprehensive, but it is largely representative.

- What is new media?
 - What are the common new media genera (types)?
 - Web sites, computer applications, video games, interactive multimedia, chat interfaces, televised sporting events (Olympic opening, Superbowl halftime shows), cell phone interfaces, hypertext novels, digital video, blogs, interactive mapping, training simulations, virtual reality, museum kiosks, multimedia presentations, e-cards, and more.
 - How is new media different from old media?
 - Channels of distribution
 - Modes of composition
 - Relationship(s) between media and consumer
 - What are some characteristics of new media?
 - What are some of the effects of new media? That is, how do they affect users? How does it facilitate or constrain the expression of cultural data?
 - What are some new media techniques?
- What is the future of media?
- What are some innovative uses of new media?
- What new media efforts have failed (e.g., Microsoft Bob), and why did they fail?
- How can new media solve human problems?
- What cultural conditions give rise to new media?

- How can new media support human activities (personal photo albums, marketing, learning, politics, creative expression)?
- How can digital media augment or extend the human body?

Books on new media theory are increasingly available on a variety of different topics. A few publishers specialize in new media theory, most notably, MIT Press, which offers quite a few staple texts. The following list constitutes includes a few new media theory standouts, though it is the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

- *New Media Reader*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort. This large textbook contains dozens of articles on new media (and its related domains) from the 20th century, including seminal articles by Vannevar Bush, Alan Turing, Douglas Engelbart, Marshal McLuhan, Michael Joyce, and Tim Berners-Lee.
- *Language of New Media* by Lev Manovich. This dense volume contains a systematic and comprehensive analysis of new media as it is practiced today.
- *Interface Culture* by Steven Johnson examines computer interfaces as artifacts of culture, revealing the dialectic between interfaces and the cultures that create and use them.
- *Leonardo's Laptop* by Ben Schneiderman examines computing from a human-centered point of view, examining not only matters of usability, but more broadly how computing assists (or could assist) human endeavors in radical new ways.

Part II: *Apologia* for New Media Theory

New media is a fun area. New media developers get to work with a number of exciting software packages to develop cool products. Nothing makes most new media developers happier than turning on their machines and developing collages, video montages, interactive games, and Web applications. Thus they must be forgiven for an initial reluctance to engage with new media theory, which suggests books with strange titles and difficult concepts. Why can't we just leave that stuff to university classrooms and just get on with our work?

That may be tempting, but new media theory offers quite a bit to new media developers, even (and perhaps especially) outside university environments. In this part of the primer, I make the case for new media theory, justifying it, helping to demystify it, and helping to calibrate expectations appropriately.

Perhaps the greatest selling point of new media theory is its inspirational force. Coding is only one part of new media authoring. Prior to that is design, which begins with a vision. Where do these visions come from? Certain aspects of a vision often suggest themselves: there is a known problem or need, and a new media project addresses it. That doesn't sound very "visionary," though, and for good reason. While new media generally solves human problems, we must recognize that identification of a problem is only a small part of the process. What is the interface? How will users interact with this content? How will authors create and maintain the content? How might the new media artifact or object transform the lives (or aspects of the lives) of its users?

Sure, one can usually short-cut all of this by going out there (on the Web, in stores, in libraries) and look at what others have done. But if you do, your work will be derivative. Literary critic Tzvetan Todorov once distinguished between two ways a species and an individual may be related to one another: (1) biological species (e.g., tigers) and individuals (e.g., a particular tiger) and (2) literary genres (e.g., epic) and works (e.g., Homer's *Iliad*). With its birth, a tiger, Todorov pointed out, does not transform or substantially alter the species to which it belongs. A literary work, in contrast, does alter or even transform its species (a genre of literature). Stated more concretely, the publication of Milton's *Paradise Lost* utterly changed English language (and arguably world) literature forever. (This criterion could be used as one means of distinguishing between literary works and pulp fiction, but that is a different matter.) The point is, creating a work that is in some sense transformative (even if only in part, and not as a whole) is a daunting task, virtually impossible to do if one is operating in a derivative mode. This is not intended to suggest that new media designers shouldn't look and see what others are doing; rather, the power of new media theory is such that it enables designers to examine other works more critically and with a greater capacity to leverage other works in the design of visionary new works. In sum, new media theory vastly empowers creativity.

In addition, new media theory provides a language for the analysis of new media objects. This language has two significant benefits. First, it makes it possible for a new media designer to be systematically creative, that is, to be creative in a disciplined, rather than haphazard fashion. We cannot always wait for our Muses; theory helps provide inspiration on-demand. One can combine an effect from one type of new media object

with a characteristic of another, asking questions such as, “What if we took the X from this and the Y from that...?” This questioning is possible because, thanks to the language of the theory, one is able to articulate subtle and hard-to-define aspects of media. The other benefit of the language that new media theory provides is that it enables us to communicate our ideas with others. Designing a transformational work is seldom done in isolation, and often teams of designers, developers, and other stakeholders must work together to create and implement a vision. The ability to articulate this vision robustly is absolutely prerequisite.

New media objects are designed for use by people; it is vital that we don’t forget that ultimately it is a human experience that we are constructing. We create new media in order to make an impact on others. Often, the full nature of this impact is complex and multilayered. Not only must the object “work” in the narrow sense (no error messages or crashes), but it should have the right nuances—some combination of “cool,” “slick,” “addictive,” “fun,” “engaging,” “professional,” “high-budget,” “casual,” “down-to-earth,” and other such notions. Once we get into areas of connotative meaning and subjective experience, we are in the realm of aesthetics, art criticism, and theory. New media theory helps designers envision and predict the subjective effects of their work on their users. This knowledge up front, as a part of the design specification, facilitates development/coding, graphic design, usability testing, marketing, and so forth.

One of the richest concepts to emerge in twentieth-century media studies is the sticky relationship between “form” and “content.” (There are many other versions of this pairing, including “structure” versus “meaning,” “syntax” versus “semantics,” “medium” versus “message.”) Critics from numerous fields have revealed time and again that this is

a false distinction, a notion sloganized in Marshall McLuhan's famous line, "the medium is the message." According to this theory, the medium more than carries a message; instead, it is partially (or even largely) constitutive of the message. This is the reason why so many movies based on novels or comic books fail: the content cannot simply be transferred to a new medium. In those instances where the translation is successful (e.g., *Bladerunner*, *A Room with a View*, and arguably Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*), it is because the creative team designing the movie took vast liberties with the original content and reconstructed it from the ground up for the new medium (this is precisely what didn't happen with the first two *Harry Potter* movies, widely regarded as "wooden," "flat," and enslaved to a literalistic rendering of J.K. Rowling's novels). Works of new media theory (and old media theory) have examined this tension in great detail, yielding great insights into the connections between the form of a medium and the cultural or social effects it is likely to create.

I have now claimed that new media theory is useful because it can serve as a foundation for (to appropriate Ben Schneiderman's term) "mega-creativity"; it can facilitate communication among project team members by expressing complex insights in a common language; and it can help designers predict (and thereby exploit) a new media object's effects on the people who use it, in one capacity or other.

I also want to take a moment to characterize what you *won't* get from new media theory: step-by-step, just-add-water instructions for the next great new media masterpiece. Such an expectation apparently underlies what I consider to be a typical (and misguided) reader review of Steven Johnson's *Interface Culture* posted at Amazon.com: "it sounds good in theory," the reader wrote, "and it's ideas are ones to be

sought after on a daily basis. Yet there is little ‘how to’ in this book.” You will see (and perhaps be tempted to make) criticisms like this again and again. Yet theory books are not how-to books. It is quite possible, even relatively easy, to write a how-to book on Dreamweaver or Flash (I’ve written several). But no book can tell you the steps to becoming a creative genius or visionary! There are no such steps. You don’t watch *Emeril* (a cooking show) on TV and complain that you can’t smell or taste what he’s cooking, much less expect to become the head chef of a chic New York restaurant. Don’t expect new media theory to effortlessly turn you into the Jorge Luis Borges of Flash. Instead, mastery of new media is a personal struggle that requires experience, effort, wide exposure to the ideas of one’s field, and a means of organizing and making sense of those ideas (and theory is that means).

Another—perhaps the most—common complaint about theory is that it is hard, needlessly obtuse. I’ve read dozens of hostile (and often frankly semi-literate) reviews on Amazon about how lousy writers of theory are. Some writers are certainly more obtuse than others, and some of them would indeed have benefited from stronger editors. But I suspect more often the problem is one of expectations: most of us are used to reading a given number of pages per hour, with a given amount of effort, and receiving a given amount of reward for the time and the effort.

If you are a normal human being, you cannot read any theory at a rate of 60 pages per hour and expect to get anything from it, even if you can easily get through 100 pages of science fiction in an hour and grasp it all. The prose that constitutes new media theory is different from the prose that constitutes a novel. *The medium is the message*. I can typically read theory at a rate of about 15-20 pages an hour (depending on the size of the

font, etc.), and philosophy/theory was the concentration of my doctoral (and now post-doctoral) research. Recalling my definition of media theory (in Part I of this primer) as an interface to the fullness of human experience of media, it is only reasonable to expect that you will grasp theory much more slowly, and with much more effort, than the kind of prose you read in a newspaper or popular novel. Put another way, I suspect that many of these theorists aren't bad writers as the hapless Amazon reader reviewers complain; rather, many of these Amazon reader reviewers are bad readers in the sense that they bring the wrong expectations and level of effort to the table. Part III of this primer is a how-to on how to read theory, and my overriding goal with this primer (and the Allecto Reader blog in general) is to make theory more accessible, by teaching people how to read it, by providing background information, and by summarizing key concepts in accessible language. Do your part: read with more patience and care than you are accustomed to. The payoff will be worth it.

As hard as theory is, I can tell you something that's even harder: being truly innovative in any field without it.

Part III: How To Read New Media Theory

Academic works, including works of new media theory, are typically written in prose. Many other things are written in prose: novels, newspapers, most email messages, instructions for assembling bikes and furniture or playing video games, text in marketing brochures, and so on. In fact, prose is the form of writing with which we are most

familiar, with which we have the most experience, and above all, for which we have the most expectations.

These expectations include the amount of effort needed to put into it, the amount of time we are willing to spend on it, as well as its means of organization and how to find information in it (headings, indices, tables of contents, image captions, etc.).

Unfortunately, many of our expectations of prose don't apply terribly well to books on theory, philosophy, and the like. When our expectations of prose are not well calibrated to what we read, we may not budget enough time, invest enough effort, or deploy appropriate interpretive strategies. In short, we fail. The book goes over our head, or we think we're following it, only to discover when we're done that we have no idea of what we read.

In this edition of the *New Media Theory Primer*, I provide several specific strategies for getting as much as possible out of theory, with the least investment on your part (this does not imply that the investment is trivial or that this will be easy). I'll begin by providing some general strategies, which should help you unlock the meaning of the theory. Then, I suggest a 3-part strategy for reading that should help you become a power reader.

General Strategies

Before describing the broader intellectual workflow (if I may use such a metaphor) for mastering theory, I'd like to suggest some general tips, which should help improve your overall ability to succeed when reading new media theory.

- **Read slowly.** Theory is by its very nature a hard topic. Even the most lucid writers take time and effort to digest. As I mentioned in an earlier part, I typically read theory at a rate of about 15-20 pages per hour, and my academic and professional backgrounds have given me heavy preparation and practice at it. Be patient and realistic.
- **Write on the text.** Underline. Paraphrase. Highlight. Writing on the text helps you identify what is most important in the text; it helps you internalize it; and it makes it easier to review the text quickly and efficiently. I categorically refuse to read theory if I can't write on it--it would simply waste my time and effort. (Obviously, don't do this on a library book!)
- **Focus intently on identifying and following the primary argument,** the largest claims. (More on this below.)
- **Resist the impulse to let your eyes glaze over** when the writer talks about something with which you are unfamiliar. If it is a passing reference, don't worry about it. But often, a writer will assume you are familiar with another writer, or a certain intellectual domain. Frankly, these assumptions are often unfair to us readers and debilitating to our comprehension. Nonetheless, Google an unfamiliar concept or word--just enough to get the gist (otherwise, you'll revert forever to following leads), or look it up in an encyclopedia or dictionary.
- **Acknowledge and live with the fact that you won't follow or remember everything.** If something just doesn't make sense, sometimes

the best thing to do is move on. Knowing when to slow down and figure it out versus when to give up and move on is a lot easier when you have at least identified the book's major claims.

All of these points emphasize that your active participation with the text, your active effort to perceive and even construct meaning from the text, is the key to reading it successfully. Passive reading may work with popular novels and newspaper articles, but if you do it with theory, you are simply wasting your time.

Three Steps to Mastering Theory: Comprehension, Application, Critique

I usually think of my mastery of a work of theory as occurring in three stages, which almost invariably follow the same order, though the boundaries between any two may be fuzzy. They are as follows:

- *Comprehension*: Simply understanding what the author is claiming, prior to worrying about whether you agree or how you might make use of this theory.
- *Application*: Applying (elements of) the theory to items in your own experience. For example, if a theorist talks about a film or painting that you've never seen, apply the same concept to a film or painting that you have seen.
- *Critique*: Situate yourself in the discourse: Do you agree with it? Can you identify its limitations (for example, a work that it should describe accurately, but does not)? Can you reveal irrational biases of the author

(e.g., a subjective preference for a certain kind of work, a certain period of work, or a certain methodology)? Could you express the idea more accurately or succinctly than the author?

For most works of prose, especially easy ones, like newspaper articles, we do all three of these simultaneously. We “get” what the article is about, and we simultaneously (and even involuntarily) form opinions about what the article describes and how it was written (e.g., the writer has a liberal/conservative bias). In my opinion, separating these processes into roughly linear steps when reading works of theory dramatically improves one’s grasp of the material and the quality of one’s response to it (via application or critique).

Step 1: Comprehension (Orienting Yourself to the Book and Identifying Its Main Claims)

Theory is hard. Comprehension is the step where people are most likely to fail. Once you’ve committed to reading a book, chapter, or article on theory, you owe it to yourself just to understand it on its own terms, before you worry about whether it will help you solve a particular problem or deciding whether it is true or full of it. At a minimum, make sure you can answer the following questions (which you usually can after reading the Introduction [by the way: *always read the Introduction!*]):

- What is the main problem/issue that the writer is trying to solve/address?
- What are the main questions that the author asks (there are usually 1-5 of the big questions)?

- How does the author intend to go about answering these questions (i.e., what is the author's methodology)?
- Briefly, in one sentence each, what is the author's answer to each of these big questions?

If you can answer the four questions above, you should be very well calibrated to the book, and it should be much easier for you to proceed onto the following.

Perhaps the primary reason we read works of theory is to learn what the author claims. Claims are non-obvious insights, which should change how one considers a subject. We should (and usually do) approach claims with skepticism. Therefore, before accepting a claim, we expect that the author will justify it for us, providing evidence that supports each claim. Evidence may come in the form of sub-claims, which themselves may need support. This intellectual agenda typically results in a common pattern.

Before I lay it out, let me give an analogy: most novels alternate between scene and summary. In the scene, we see a dialogue between two participants, or read a detailed, blow-by-blow description of a sequence of events as they transpire. After the scene, we usually see a summary of events that occur thereafter, described from a distance; for example, we might hear about what happened over the course of the next month or year, or we might learn in a summary fashion about how another character reacted to the scene. Following this, we have another scene, and the pattern repeats.

New media theory is not composed of alternating scenes and summaries, but that is not to say that it is unstructured and without pattern. Rather, most works of theory are divided by topic (these often appear in the headings and subheadings). Within a topic, you can expect to see (as a rule) about one major claim about that topic. This claim is

then followed by evidence and examples that support this claim. Once the claim is justified, the text typically moves onto a new topic and a new claim. Recognizing the topic-claim-evidence pattern makes it much easier to find important information, especially since as I mentioned earlier, it is usually the claims that we are most interested in.

Now, how do you recognize a claim? The following should help:

- Claims typically, but not necessarily, appear as declarative sentences (not questions, usually not conditional, usually not imperatives [commands to reader]). Regardless of how they are phrased, they can almost always be paraphrased as declarative sentences.
- Claims typically appear near the beginnings and endings of sections; that is, expect to find important claims clustering around headings.
- The work's discussion is centered on and orients itself to claims. That is, claims are usually a theoretical work's main organizing principle.
- Claims sometimes are not made explicit (yes, this can be annoying and burdensome to the reader, but it happens).
- Claims often make distinctions. For example, "whereas in old media, we see characteristics *a,b,c*; in new media, we see characteristics *1,2,3*."
- Claims often make or rely on false or exaggerated distinctions (political discourse demonstrates this most clearly).

Let's practice! Below is a paragraph from Stephen Wilson's book, *Information Arts*. This paragraph appears in a section in which he is analyzing the divide between the

arts and sciences, exploring ways to bridge the gap constructively. See if you can spot the main claim in this paragraph. Wilson writes:

In recent years, critical theory has been a provocative source of thought about the interplay of art, media, science, and technology. Each of the major sections of this book presents pertinent examples of this analysis. However, in its rush to deconstruct scientific research and technological innovation as the manifestation of metanarratives, critical theory leaves little room for the appearance of genuine innovation or the creation of new possibilities. While it has become predominant in the arts, it is not so well accepted in the worlds of science and technology. This chapter analyzes the special problems that this disjunction poses for technoscientifically influenced artists and examines various stances that artists can take in working with research.

All of these sentences are declarative, so grammatically speaking, all of them are claims. But when you add my criterion that claims assert something non-obvious or insightful, only one sentence truly manifests a claim: “*in its rush to deconstruct scientific research and technological innovation as the manifestation of metanarratives, critical theory leaves little room for the appearance of genuine innovation or the creation of new possibilities.*” The rest of the statements summarize what is already known about critical theory (e.g., that it is an interdisciplinary form of research, that it is more used in the arts than in the sciences, that it attacks scientific research on the grounds that it is self-delusional) or what the book will cover (that examples of critical theory will be sprinkled throughout the book, what this chapter will examine). But the statement that critical theory is ill-equipped to analyze genuine innovation because it is preoccupied with its own methodology (in this case, deconstruction) is an original claim, which would take some arguing to defend. In addition, the author returns to this claim several times in the ensuing discussion, which demonstrates my other point that works on theory are organized around claims.

Simply understanding what the author is claiming, and why she or he believes that these claims solve the main problems the book addresses, is the hardest and most important part of reading a work of theory. What this accomplished, everything else is comparatively easy.

Step 2: Application (What Would the Author Say About Object O?)

A work of theory is typically a hierarchically organized collection of claims about a given topic. Theory is abstract, and by definition claims to speak for more than itself. That is, a work of new media theory claims to speak about new media, that is to say, all (or at least most) of those things that we think belong to the category of new media. But the set of things that belong to the subject is much larger than even a large book can address. Therefore, the writer selects some examples, in our case, sample new media objects, such as the video game *Myst* or a Web shopping cart.

In this step, which I call “Application,” you effectively test the author’s theory. First, you evaluate how well the theory describes or lends insight to the samples that the author her- or himself identifies. Does the theory work as described? Remember, the theory is not going to provide a recipe for brilliance (unless it is a *very good* theory); rather, theory should provide tools to make you more thoughtful. And as that last clause implies, you still have to think!

Second, you apply the theory to some other object that it is the same set of objects, but which the author does not discuss. Another way to do this is to ask, “What would *Author A* have to say about *Object O*?” *Object O* could be a work of your own that you are trying to improve, or it could be a model for the kind of work that you would like to build. It could simply be some other work that you find interesting. The goal in this is

to determine whether the author's theory, applied out of the box, so to speak, leads you to genuine new insights about whatever it is you are contemplating.

If the application of the theory leads you to have new ideas, or encourages you to create a more original/usable/aesthetic design, then the application of the theory (and presumably the theory itself) is successful.

Step 3: Critique (Optional: Join the Discourse!)

It is a perfectly legitimate use of theory to read it, apply it, benefit from it, and leave well enough alone. If reading a book of theory helps you design a great product, then it would be hard to argue that you failed to achieve your potential (as long as creating a great project was your main goal).

Sometimes, though, you'll want to jump into the discourse itself. You may be driven by strong disagreement with a theory, or perhaps you just enjoy philosophizing. You don't need to publish your philosophizing; you could dialogue with a friend over some iced tea, or rage about it all on your own in your blog. Regardless of the outlet, if you ask how the theory itself as a theory could be made better, you've entered the realm of critique.

At this point, you might ask any of the following:

- What does the theory fail to account for? (For example, Wilson's claim cited earlier that critical theory is better at revealing the mundane causes of apparent leaps of innovation and deflating their glory than it is as dealing with genuine innovation very well.)
- What are the limits of the theory? That is, what is included within its purview, and what is outside of it?

- Who benefits from this theory? Are these benefits benevolently rational (make the world a better place) or do they serve some nefarious agenda (help the powerful maintain their power by oppressing the weak, or help university faculty get tenure [which sometimes amounts to the same thing]).
- What underlying misconception or naïveté prevents this theory from working as well as it could?
- How might this theory be adapted to solve a different problem perhaps in a different field?

There are many other such questions, but they tend to be variations of the same theme: how you can participate in the theoretical discourse at level of theory, as opposed to practice.

I characterize this step as optional, because you can be successful at certain professional activities without jumping into the theoretical discourse, or at least without doing it particularly well from a philosophical standpoint. Nonetheless, if you genuinely comprehend the theory, and you apply it to specific situations, you will naturally begin to think evaluatively. At some point, if you are (or want to be) a creative professional, you will develop your own theory (or theories), consciously or otherwise. Your own theory, even if it isn't worked out with academic rigor, will shape how you approach problems, how you work, and what your work looks like.

When all is said and done, your own theory will play a formative role in your professional success as well as personal fulfillment. Obviously, with so much at stake, the better you are with theory, the more successful you will be.