

sneakers with a suit could be interpreted a number of different ways—that the wearer is hip, that the wearer is homeless or out of pocket, or that the wearer has a long walk to public transportation. So, although we may obsess over the messages sent by the clothes our friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, teachers, parents, and idols wear, we must always keep in mind that fashion is a fluid text, contingent on interpretation. As any reader of a poem or short story knows, the key to accurate interpretation is context. So, what the guest writer may have been suggesting with the combination of hip clothes but ratty sweater is something like, “Even though I’m now a cool Hollywood writer, I’m also, really, at my core, a lot like you academic types.” Of course, he also may have been mocking us academic types.

I could never decide what the sweater signified, but I’m sure it was trying to tell me something. If I ever run into the writer again, I’m going to ask him what the sweater meant, but who knows if he will tell the truth!

## Reading and Writing About a Bicycle

**Jonathan Hunt**

NOT LONG AGO, and quite suddenly, it seemed, my neighborhood was overrun by bicyclists on a new kind of bike—a sort of *reduced* bike, with no brakes or gears. Or let me put it more precisely: *I* was nearly overrun. The culprit was a young person who sped through an intersection against the light and without slowing, leaving consternation and resentment behind her among the pedestrians and motorists who—naively, it now seemed—allowed their movements to be guided by illuminated signals. As she flew away down the street, I could see that she was on a track bike, a special kind of racing bicycle built



Fixie graffiti, downtown San Francisco (2007). © Jonathan Hunt. Some rights reserved.



Racers at Hellyer Park Velodrome (2007). © Steven Ryan. Some rights reserved.



Sylvester Stallone as Judge Dredd.

for indoor competition, characterized by a single fixed gear; hence its more popular name, the “fixie.”

But the fixie subculture in my neighborhood had nothing to do with track racing, which shares most of the visual features of the professional road racing. If you have cable, you can watch it on *Versus* (the rodeo, kickboxing, deer-hunting, and cycling channel): brightly colored bicycles matching the tight Lycra outfits of their athletic riders, bicycles and cyclists alike splashed all over with the names and logos of corporate sponsors, all shaved legs and huge lungs topped with Judge Dredd helmets, chasing each other around and around according to complicated and opaque rules.

The skinny kids congregating in front of the coffee shop down the street or in certain corners of the local park didn’t look like that. They had unruly hair and tattooed arms, and their astonishingly tight pants were scuffed black denim, not shiny Lycra. Their gleaming, matchy bicycles at first seemed a contrast to their scruffy appearance: I saw an orange bike with an orange seat, orange wheels, orange tires, orange pedals and orange handlebar tape, its few chrome bits polished to a gleam. Another bike, flawlessly powder blue, featured white handlebar tape with red hearts on it, and an ace of hearts playing card to match,



“Sweet Pink Fixie in SF” (2006). © Jean Davis. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

stuck jauntily in the spokes of the rear wheel. Among these pristine steeds, some bikes seemed to have the same careful carelessness as their owner’s hairstyle: an old, chipped steel frame seemed to take pride in the worn decal with the name of a long-dead Italian frame-builder; a low-end ten-speed crusted with grease and dirt, converted to a fixie by removal of the brakes and replacement of the back wheel.

In fixie subculture, then, the bikes themselves vary widely, but two properties are invariably prized. The first of these is minimalism. None of the fixed-gear bikes I’ve spotted have racks, baskets, fenders, chain guards, cushy seats, bells, or other common bicycle accessories in the style of Pee-Wee Herman’s beloved cruiser. The second property is a related lack of safety features: very few have reflectors or brakes (in fact, a T-shirt in circulation proclaims “If it’s fixed, don’t brake it”)—in a related sartorial code, few fixie riders I’ve seen wear helmets, favoring faded cycling caps with Italian brand names: *Campagnolo*, *Cinelli*, *Bottecchia*.

In one sense, the values of a subculture are conveyed quite clearly in the choice of display objects (bikes, in this case, but hairstyles, handbags, or hot rods would do equally well). The fixie rider values sleek minimalism tinged with rebellious nostalgia, a reaction against the gadgetry-driven “newer-is-better” ethos that dominates the bicycle industry and American consumer culture more broadly. Against the ever-more-complicated gearing, braking, and suspension systems of mountain and road bikes, the fixie recalls a lost golden age of European cycling, an age before Lycra shorts, neon colors, and Styrofoam helmets (a sacred text is *The Impossible Hour*, Danish director Jørgen Leth’s 1974 homage to cycling on the track). Against the square practicality of conventional bicycle advocates, the fixie rider values a stylish recklessness, an affiliation with outlaw bike messenger culture (which pioneered the fixed-gear trend decades ago). Steve Carell’s character in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* is the antithesis of fixie cool.



Trackstars (2007). © Randy Reddig. All rights reserved. Used by permission.



Still from *The Impossible Hour* (1974).

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Yet the meaning of a display-oriented subculture goes beyond the conscious messages associated with choices of accessories, clothing, hairstyles, or music. The fixie cyclist (or fixist? fixster?) announces her or his difference or departure from the “parent” culture (and other bicycle subcultures), but in doing so, remains entwined in systems of sameness and difference that constitute all cultural affiliations. In short, fixie variation takes place within an overarching sameness: the fixie enthusiast seems free to choose colors (generally eschewing patterns) and certain limited accessories (the playing card in the spokes, the saddle), and in fact, the act of making these choices is strongly encouraged. The oohs and ahs down at the coffee shop are exclusively reserved for unique bikes, such as the one with mismatched wheels but perfect color coordination, a combination of components displaying the owner’s creativity and design sense. Fixie cool has its boundaries, just as any kind of design or fashion statement: *cool* involves breaking certain sets of rules (and, in some cases, laws), but at the same time, it requires adherence to a strict new set of conventions.

The fixed-gear bike is thus not just a vehicle for transport (although it is that), but it is also a vehicle for communicating the values and characteristics of its owner. Many of these values and characteristics are transmitted intentionally, such as design sense, mechanical aptitude, and riding skills; the fixster values these traits in her- or himself and in fixie “colleagues.” In selecting components, in assembling the bicycle, and in surviving urban traffic on a bicycle with no brakes, the fixist broadcasts these desirable traits—traits that, to those not attached to the subculture, seem annoying or irresponsible.

The fixie bicycle, then, is a marker of opposition to mainstream culture, with its sensible values and readily available consumer choices. Trapped in a world where people are defined



“Off-the-rack Masi” (2007). © Jonathan Hunt. Some rights reserved.



“Your Fixie Makes You Look Fat” (2006). © Franco Follini. Some rights reserved.

by the objects they buy at the mall, the fixist aspires to be different by assembling a unique machine—because of this aspiration, an off-the-rack Bianchi or Masi fixie from the bike shop is practically a badge of shame (note, however, that even corporate manufacture of fixies adheres to the style code: the dreaded Bianchi is all chrome, with minimalist decals). Like any consumers, fixsters seek to map out their individualities with a constellation of purchases, but as with purchasers of Levi’s and Mini Coopers, their individuality is commodified by the very gesture (the purchase) that seeks to establish it.

The meaning of the fixed-gear bike—like the meaning of any object—depends on a play of sameness and difference: it is like other bikes, yet not like them; its rider is like other consumers, yet different. Like other texts, the fixie can be read in isolation or in relation to related systems of meaning (e.g., the fashion system, the gender system). Some of its meanings are explicit and intentional; others, less flattering to the rider, cannot be outrun no matter how fast they pedal.

## Reading and Writing About Video Games

Peter Hartlaub

WE ARE AT THE BEGINNING, and there is only Pong.

Like a single-celled organism crawling out of the primordial ooze, it appears as an outhouse-size arcade game in a few bars and pizza parlors in 1972, before a much smaller take-home version starts selling at Sears. Both are as simple looking as a block of cheese.

Reading the game takes a split second, if you’re slow. Two long rectangles moving on a vertical axis try to block a small square block traveling horizontally or diagonally, with numbers in the upper left and right corners of the screen