DIGITALISM: TOWARDS A THEORY OF DIGITAL RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

by

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ABSTRACT

DIGITALISM: TOWARDS THEORIES OF

DIGITAL RHETORIC AND

COMPOSITION

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In this thesis, I argue that the text and the textual are inherently digital and, thus, have properties that are information theoretic in origin. From that premise, I use an interdisciplinary approach to construct a theory for the reading and deconstruction of digital works and their viewers, which I then use to form a method for the analysis, composition, and reading of texts "digitally."

The first two chapters introduce the relation of digital philosophy and information theory to textual works, which leads into the third chapter's ontology of digital works and their audience. Chapters four introduces the power of simulacrum in digital works and the effects networked cultures have on identity. From there, chapter five explores visual interfaces in comics and economic interfaces in memetics, with "analog" examples. Chapter six applies the conclusions of chapter five to digital works and online cultures. Chapter seven synthesizes these seemingly divergent ideas into a cohesive method of "digital" reading, composition, and analysis. In the concluding chapter, I apply my "digital" rhetorical method to current political ideologies and propose an emergent shift towards a post-ideological mode of political thinking.

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CHAPTER 1

STRANGE LOOPS, AN INTRODUCTION

1.1 A Brief Overview of My Work

When I began this endeavor, I had it in my mind that I would move away from the past–beyond the likes of Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, Kenneth Burke, Northrop Frye, and others–into a new, completely digital future. Yet, as I moved from these thinkers, I always seemed to return to them, as if perpetually running along a möbius strip. I felt, at least at first, that this was a failing on my part, an inability to usher in fresh, new intellectual ground rather than treading over the ground of old.

In an attempt to remedy this issue I returned to the works of these minds of the past and re-examined their methods in hopes of finding what was so attractive about their ideas and to answer the most persistent question through this whole ordeal: Why did I always return to these same texts, these same places? During the re-examination, I realized that the language of their texts contained striking similarities to the language of technology fields. There were mentions of bits of information and cybernetics by Barthes, containers of symbolic information by Burke, the importance of the utterance-the whole message-over the individual parts by Bahkthin, and the look at the larger overarching narrative within works by Frye, and all of this was relevant and still pertinent to what I was aiming towards. It seemed that much of the language and ideas I had been employing in metaphors and frameworks to describe the incorporation of my "new" ideas on digital technologies into traditional, non-digital composition weren't so new and separate from the past.

It was at this point I had an epiphany: the past was already digital, with the present bringing this fact to the forefront, while the future offers an ever-improving looking-glass that brings this (dare I say) truth into increasing levels of focus. This realization caused me to rethink

what I already knew about the subject matter at hand and shifted my position on digital "technologies". No longer did I see these earlier works and texts, and the ideas they contained, as items relegated only to the past but as pathways that had borne fruit in the technology of the present.

Well, if the past was already "digital," then what does digital actually mean?

CHAPTER 2

DIGITAL[ISM] AND DIGITAL MEDIA

The word digital refers to a range of things. At its root it means numeric representation, as in digits. If such is the case, then what makes digital technology *digital*? For these technologies the word digital refers to digital systems, which are data models based on the use of discrete or discontinuous quantities (signals, symbols, numbers, etc.) to represent and convey information. Discontinuous quantities communicate and transport data in smaller that come together to form a larger whole. The most common conception of digital information is that it entails the use of binary code and computers, which is not the case at all; binary encoding has merely become the most ubiquitous form of digital data due to its basis in electrical engineering, computer science, and communication systems. There are many examples of non-computer-based digital systems such as Morse code, which is a communication system that "encodes" textual characters into rhythmic patterns of on-off states for the use via telegraph and, later, other communication technologies and mediums.[1]

The alphabet can be described as digital since each letter *represents* a particular sound that, individually, conveys little semantic information for communication until these individual pieces are brought together to form words and sentences; representation is the core of digital systems.[2] In the instance of the alphabet, it acts as a means of transcoding "non-visual relations and realities into visual terms" (McLuhan 160) and thus changing the manner in which people interact with words and language. Books in this context, then, are an analog storage or archive for a type of transcoded digital data, meaning that digital is a term that refers not to any specific

[1] Claude Shannon, in *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (*MTC*), states that telegraphy is an example of a discrete channel. (3)
[2] Shannon, in *MTC*, uses "natural languages" like English and Chinese as examples of discrete information. (5)

type of technology (whether computer or non-computer based) but rather a general method and approach to information; digital “technology” is a system treatment of information composed of discrete quantities or values. Of course, what comes to mind, as mentioned earlier, is the conception of digital technology as having to deal with computers (although that is where much of this work will move towards) it just must be understood that digital is more than just computer technology, it is an approach to dealing with information with the aim of creating information that is storable, transportable, replicable and malleable.

Regardless of that fact, though, digital technologies entered the realm of communication, computers, and electronics (and are primarily associated with these fields) and, with these fields, the development of several techniques to process different modalities–sound, motion, and images–into forms usable in a variety of digital systems. These processes instilled these modalities, and their media counterparts, with several distinct properties that arise from these differences between digital and analog systems. These properties, which are the distinguishing characteristics of digital data within digital systems, include the following: Synchronization and Syntax, Language, Error Reduction and Data Fidelity, and Granularity. The definitions for the following will be based on a digital communication system model as a means of relating them to the transport and presentation of text and media.

Synchronization refers to the methods applied to digital data to create a syntax that distinguishes between the beginning and end of data sequences to ensure a communication is understood properly, such as the additional pulses added to a television broadcast signal to synchronize the display between multiple device screens. (Noll 95) This quality is akin to grammar in languages since many common techniques for synchronization are similar to actual grammar in spoken and written languages, like pauses and punctuation. So, it is possible to describe digital media as having a grammar that influenced by or inherited from the digital system that generated it.

Language is the arbitrary shared information required by any parties (the transmitter and the receiver) involved in a communication to understand the meaning and/or use of the data, which includes things like methods of synchronization or the range for values within data.[3] This factor relates to the context required to understand and interpret the data, such as digital media, generated within a digital system.

Error Reduction and Data Fidelity are two separate, but directly linked, properties. In analog communications, the medium or channel used can be subject to "noise" (the extra data created by external disturbances, such as electrical signals, in the channel of communication). Because of the presence of noise in analog systems, a successive copy of data stored on an analog medium replicates any noise in the original copy and also adds any additional noise that is present during the copying process. These factors result in analog copies degrading in quality with each successive replication or, to put it simply, analog systems have low data fidelity.[4] Digital systems do not suffer from noise, meaning that successive copies of data within digital systems maintain their quality and do not degrade due to noise; errors in digital systems arise from other factors, such as the misplacement of a portion of the data —though these factors have various checks to decrease the occurrence of such errors.[5] Because of this, digital data has high fidelity and is highly transportable via copying, allowing media to take on a memetic or viral/parasitic nature in certain contexts.

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[3] In the *MTC*, Shannon explains how a discrete channel can "produce a text consisting of a sequence of 'words'…" that comprise "…artificial languages" that can be used to approximate to words within a natural language. (6)

[4] The original digital communication systems conceived by figures like Shannon transmitted digital information over analog channels (like cables) subject to noise and defined a method of redundancy (repeated transmission of the same 'message') to remove errors from a transmission through the application of probability theory. (Shannon 22)

[5] Digital copies can be degraded from the original in cases where a copy is created using a "lossy" compression codec. Lossy compression removes a portion of data that the codecs algorithm was designed to view as extraneous or unnecessary. However, successive copies of these "lossy" copies will not further reduce quality unless the new copy is re-encoded again using a "lossy" compression codec. In contrast to lossy compression is lossless, which retains data fidelity.

Granularity is associated with the processes used to convey analog data within a digital system through the use of quantization. Quantization is the approximation or estimation of analog values as digital values, or to put it more simply, analog to digital conversion. (Noll 71) An example of quantization is the conversion of analog sound waves to digital sequences, shown in Figure 1. When an analog signal is converted to a digital signal using quantization there is a degree of error that occurs resulting from the digital signal not exactly matching the original analog form due to limitations in the ability to quantify analog data exactly with discrete values, as shown in the image to the right of a sound wave being quantized to discrete time and discrete values for the frequency. Another more readily understandable example is the rounding of numbers to certain decimal places; in these cases, there is a loss of some data from the rounding, which is what occurs with quantization. In these instances, granularity defines the degree or range in values can be rounded to. The point of this in digital media is the ability to distinguish between digital copies and the original sources for these copies and relates to some larger theoretical issues, in terms of dealing with digital media, such as simulacrum and simulation and augmented reality.

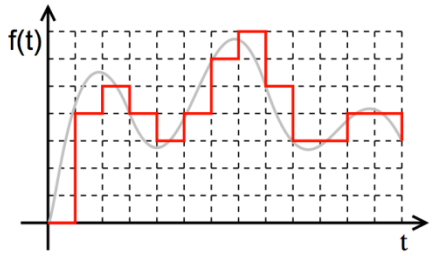

Figure 2.1 An example of a quantized sound wave

More specific elements that emerge from these properties will be discussed very shortly.

So, what does this mean for composition and related disciplines like rhetoric and literature? In the case of digital media it means we have the parts already available to quickly produce a usable framework, an ontology if you will, for examining these materials and the

world they exist in. The use of digital frameworks to describe the universe and its parts as a whole is where the term Digitalism, or digital philosophy, comes into play.

Digitalism originated from several figures (Edward Fredkin, Rudy Rucker, and Stephen Wolfram to name a few of the more prominent proponents) in computer science, mathematics and physics attempting to answer (or increase the clarity of existing answers to) several problems in some of the larger theories of the mechanics of the universe and the philosophical implications of said mechanics. There are many different aspects to these figures interpretation and application of a digital interpretation of the universe, so I do not want to diverge too much into the details of the properties, laws, and separate conclusions that each of these figures have reached. In either case, the general conclusions that each of these different figures argue for, though, takes the premise of Gottfried Leibniz' metaphysics (the monad) and reinterpret it (or remediate, if you will) in digital terms by concluding that the universe is, as a whole, a digital system made up of bits of digital information.[6] This aspect of digital philosophy brings in larger questions surrounding the relation of data to information and the role this plays in the conception of digital information and acts as a link between the meaning of Digitalism as used by its originators and my use of the term.

So, first, what is data and what is information? Data, as perceived by humans, is factual information. Simple? Well, what is "factual information"? True information—what is *information*? Information is a phenomena that is hard to describe fully and accurately due to the multifaceted

[6] The term remediate refers to the new media theories of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin. Bolter and Grusin define remediation as a phenomenon that results from the drive to push media towards either immediacy or hypermediacy. Immediacy involves the use of "transparent" interfaces that give a viewer an immediate sense of reality, such as what occurs with the use of perspective in photography to give the illusion of depth; as a result, immediacy is associated with the rhetorical push towards virtual reality. Hypermediacy, in contrast, involves the use of "opaque" interfaces that constantly remind the user of the medium they are interacting with, such as the windows, buttons, menus, and scroll-bars of modern desktop computer graphic user interfaces. Remediacy, in a purely media studies sense, is the re-use and re-fashioning of conventions of interaction and design that emerge from both of these pushes, which ultimately, as Bolter and Grusin explain, keep media from ever achieving the ideal of immediacy or hypermediacy. But, in terms of the application to other disciplines, remediacy can also be used to describe the constant refashioning of texts and works and ideas.

nature of such a phenomena; as Luciano Floridi explains, asking ‘what is information’ is the equivalent of asking ‘what is knowledge?’ or ‘what is virtue?’ since such questions are not “a request for dictionary explanations but an ideal point of intersection of philosophical investigations.” (1) The complexity of information is likely why there is a whole field of study devoted to the subject.

One way to describe information is that it is the combination of data with meaning (Floridi 4), or “semantic information.” What this formulation of information translates to is that data are the whole collection of raw-input that an observing body is capable of perceiving. Meaning, then, is the interpretation or translation of raw-input into a usable or understandable form. This construction of information would then mean that data are the collection of sensory input that we receive via external stimuli. Meaning would then be the various factors (such as the context) that affect our interpretation of the sensory input that our bodies receive. In essence, information is a representation of reality—an *abstraction*.

I am sure you see a problem with this construction: data are factual information which makes the formulation of information as data combined with meaning sound very much like a tautology; other formulations of information share this problem as well. So, let me clarify how these statements relate to each other. To say that data are factual information and then formulate information as data with meaning would therefore make data the raw-input that an observing body can verify and prove as either ‘true’ or ‘untrue’ or, being that information is a representation of reality, ‘real or ‘unreal’ representations of reality. So data is Boolean in nature, whereas information (in the semantic construction) is a multifaceted interpretation of data. Now, if applied to digital systems, this formulation of information therefore means that digital data would be verifiable or well-formed abstractions of reality formed using discontinuous quantities. The various media products, remixes, and analyses—the interpretations and applications of the digital 'reality'—that result from digital data are, then, digital information. As explained earlier, digital philosophy, working from this mind set, took these concepts about the relations between

digital information and systems, specifically within electrical engineering and computer science, several steps further and applied them to the whole universe, describing everything as 'bits' of information in constant processes.[7]

In the case of this paper Digitalism refers to a digital framework or ontology that will be used specifically for examining the application of rhetoric within digital media, which we can—logically speaking at least—be applied reflexively back onto rhetoric, and possibly other fields. In other words: what occurs with digital media likely occurs with traditional media (and possibly other areas as well) and what occurs with digital media, although different or less conventional, may not be as new as you think. Some examples of this are the manner in which digital systems remediate several divergent ideas, helping them converge, by providing a middle ground or interface for these different ideas to intersect and interact. So, overall, the goal of a digitalist perspective is to create (or maybe reveal is more accurate) some basic structures that exist within digital media and are also created by those that interact with said media and create a relation to traditional media. Because of the complex, web-like nature of the material to be discussed, I will be employing a reference point from literary studies to ground my structuring and discussion of digital media works: The Work-Text and Author-Reader binaries. I am basing the top layer of structuration on the identification of two items that relate to the Work-Text and Author-Reader. First is the emergence of a more multifaceted type of Text that is not just textual but instead a composition of various digital modalities and media: Data (or DataWorks to add clarity to the reading of this text). These new DataWorks compositions allow for a different type of Reader to emerge. This new Reader has aspects that are associated more with the Author

[7] A bit is the basic unit of information in computer science. It is generally defined as "binary digit", which is taken from Claude Shannon's work *Mathematical Theory of Communication*, a seminal work in information and communication studies. In this work, Shannon described a method to encode "raw information" (data) into a binary form (bits) using algorithm's derived from probability theory. The goal, and thesis of Shannon's work, was that a transmission could be reliably done over a "noisy" channel (which is a medium that suffers from external interference) if the transmission did not exceed the channel's data capacity. The binary encoding of data allowed the compression of signals to be transmitted. The compression of said signals increased the reliability of the transmissions to be successfully sent and received.

and others that are not really associated with either the Reader or Author, a Reader that is able to actively write onto the DataWorks they interact with: the User. From these new Readers and Texts, I have devised some structures that will help guide our understanding of digital media and the emerging rhetorics that are forming from digital media.

CHAPTER 3

DATA AND USERS

3.1 The Structures of Data and Spectrum of Users

DataWorks and Users operate both separately and together, creating a dynamic form of rhetoric that communicates ideas derived from both the content and structures of the Data and the social realm of the User. Because the rhetoric that emerges from this interaction is so dynamic, it seems only logical to provide some basic dissection of the underlying structures to simplify and quantify some of the more prominent interactions. DataWorks refer to the various works of digital media that Users encounter and may interact with. Since DataWorks are digital, they can consist of many parts but will generally be discussed in these three main areas to help clarify the manner in which Users interact with these new texts. Each of these terms comes from, or they are related to, computer or information technology and are used as extended metaphors and consist of the following: Content-Streams, Containers, and Metadata. These three structures of DataWorks facilitate a particular purpose. Content-Streams consist of the information that Users immediately interact with, Containers consist of structures (grammar if you will) that surround Content-Streams and provide direction for intended interactions, and Metadata is extra information about the DataWork itself and provide links to other DataWorks/Users. Although that all may sound simple, it really isn't and needs further elaboration for each part to provide a full understanding of these structures, and in turn DataWorks.

First, Content-Streams, or data-streams might be a more technically accurate term, refers to digital data samples that are transmitted and processed by computers in certain contexts. An example of an audio Content-Stream would be the different audio tracks that may be contained within a single movie file on a computer (or computer-like device) or a DVD movie

being played on a television. In the context of DataWorks, Content-Streams refer to the data and information that Users see, hear, and/or interact with–the images, sounds, and text that are encountered. Depending on the choices of a Producer and the media used, Content-Streams can be distinct and separated from each other (such as the audio, video, and possibly subtitles of a movie that you would play on a computer) or tightly bound together, such as is the case with the final mix of a musical composition that, while in production, would have been composed of several distinct tracks. This separation of distinct portions of data is very important and facilitated by Containers.

Containers refer to media container-file formats, which are files used to store digital content.[8] For computers, Containers act as an interface between a program application and the digital content stored within the Container; the Container tells a program how to interact with and what functions to use with the digital data it stores. Examples of a Container are file formats like AVI or MKV which have specifications for a variety of Content-Streams (video, audio, graphics, metadata, sub-titles, copyright protection, etc.) to be packaged together into a single file. What is most important about Containers is that they do not specify the way data is encoded and maintain structural separations between Content-Streams to allow simple and efficient integration of digital media into a variety of systems and to facilitate different User types. The encoding of a Content-Stream is the reason that a User cannot always open certain media files. For example, they may have a media application that can play AVI files but the actual content of an AVI file is not always encoded in a form usable by all media applications. In the context of DataWorks, Containers refer to the structural elements that are used to shape

[8] In computer terms, a container format, also known as a wrapper format, is a meta-file structure for storing data and metadata. A container format does not dictate the encoding of the stored data. An example of a container format would be the MP4 multimedia file format. A MP4 can be used for both video and audio and does not dictate the encoding used for the stored data. In contrast, a non-container media format would be the MP3 encoder format, as MP3's require the use of a standardized, but patented, lossy-compression encoding of the audio data. Michael Brown provides a good summary of container formats in his *Maximum PC* article "White Paper: Media Container File Formats."

and direct the intended manner in which a User is to consume, digest, and/or interact with the Content-Streams and can be thought of as the interface for a DataWork. In some cases Containers are very rigid, such as in comic books that use panels aligned on a grid; the layouts of the pages in such comics tend to maintain a persistent quality of time and framing for the Content-Streams, keeping them highly separated. In other cases, the Containers are more plastic or fluid, such as with many graphical images in which the structure is implied by the arrangement of content and more open to interpretation. And, in some cases, Containers seem non-existent, such as with certain types of aleatoric music that leaves elements of the composition to chance. Containers can also be the method of delivery for a DataWork, such as the medium/media employed, and affect the manner in which a DataWork is replicated, distributed, and/or manipulated. The direction that Containers provide is highly important and will take up a lot of focus, but there is a larger layer of information that surrounds Containers: Metadata.

Metadata, a term from the field of information technology, is data about an object or piece of information and is used in activities like cataloging or archiving and, as a result, appears often when dealing with digital media. A simple definition for Metadata is that it is data about data or, to put it in even simpler terms, it describes a particular piece of data. Examples of Metadata are the title of a work, the author(s)/creator(s)/producer(s), year of completion and publication, genre, medium/media, and so on. In the case of DataWorks, Metadata works in a similar fashion but, instead of just being descriptive information, also refers to the whole gamut of information surrounding the DataWork, which includes more critical questions such as: How does the DataWork fit into larger metanarratives? What are critical reactions to the DataWork? How do the structures of this DataWork relate to other similar or dissimilar DataWork? And so on. In most cases in this paper, Metadata will be the linking agent for DataWorks to the larger social realms of Users.

Users, as you may have deduced, is a catch-all term for people that are using, interacting, consuming, or doing just about anything with DataWorks. What makes Users interesting is that they are able to operate as both readers and writers and are able to engage with DataWorks at a variety of levels, which may or may not have a hierarchy in place or implied; it may be more accurate to describe this as modes of engagement rather than levels. In one mode, on the far end of the spectrum of available modes, a User can be a passive receiver of DataWorks, focused on consuming the information and engaging with it on a mostly sensory level for entertainment or to be informed on a matter without necessarily posing any analysis or critical response to the information. This mode of engagement, the Consumer, is not necessarily faulty, as the term passive is generally viewed as a negative or negating term, and it may be preferable for certain DataWorks that are more, to put it in McLuhan terms, *Hot.*[9]

On the farthest end from this mode a User can act a highly-active ReMixer that both consumes and digests DataWorks, enabling the User to understand the underlying structures and metadata of the DataWork to the point of being able to actively reshape and reuse the DataWork to create new products. These new products may possibly create metanarratives that operate from within and beyond these new DataWorks. This mode requires an application of critical analysis that can work with both Hot and Cold DataWorks, although it might work best with Cold DataWorks that have a larger area of space for interpretation and experimentation.

The other areas of the spectrum sandwiched between these two modes are semi active and active: Critics and Producers. Critics engage with and add to or modify the Metadata of

[9] McLuhan uses the terms and Hot and Cool in *Understanding Media* to describe "high-definition" and "low-definition" media. Hot, or high-definition, media engage one sense of a viewer to such a degree that the viewer requires very little participation to understand what is occurring. An example of hot media would be movies, which primarily engage a viewer's vision. Cool, or low-definition, media in contrast to Hot media have less detail and thus require more effort from a viewer to discern the meaning of what is occurring. An example McLuhan uses is television, which at the time was mostly shot live and broadcast with much lower quality picture than we encounter today. A more relevant example of Hot and Cool media would be comic books, which are becoming increasingly more detailed and provide many panels of information, and comic strips, which generally are less detailed and use few panels to usually convey a single point.

DataWorks, which possibly contributes to larger metanarratives that are employed by ReMixers and encountered by Consumers. Producers create new DataWorks for users to consume and, depending on their mode of engagement, digest.

Depending on the communication medium in use, a User's ability to move between these different modes of engagement is quite variable. In the case of "old" media, a User would generally be expected to require an approved outlet or forum to be considered a Critic or a Producer and the notion of a ReMixer and remixing as a legitimate form of production was usually not yet in existence. Consumers were also mostly only seen as important in economic terms for maintaining the established systems and processes of old media outlets such as broadcasting and publishing companies. The Internet, luckily, facilitates a User's ability to move fluidly, and at the Users whim, between these different modes of engagement and between different modalities without an overarching approval process.

3.2 Digital Alchemy: The New Monism of Data

> It from bit. Otherwise put, every "it"—every particle, every field of force, even the space-time continuum itself—derives its function, its meaning, its very existence entirely—even if in some contexts indirectly—from the apparatus-elicited answers to yes-or-no questions, binary choices, bits. "It from bit" symbolizes the idea that every item of the physical world has at bottom—a very deep bottom, in most instances—an immaterial source and explanation; that which we call reality arises in the last analysis from the posing of yes-no questions and the registering of equipment-evoked responses; in short, that all things physical are information-theoretic in origin and that this is a participatory universe. (Wheeler 5)

John Archibald Wheeler was a physicist and a collaborator with Albert Einstein. In the later years of his work, he concluded that information theory was a key element to physics and declared that all physical things originate from an informational base. This declaration,

demonstrated in his description of information, constitutes digital data, and more specifically binary information, as the singular substance that makes up the universe as a whole: It from bit. This perspective of the universe is one of the foundational points of the DataWork as a step beyond the Work and the Text and can be expressed, metaphorically, as alchemy.

The goal of alchemy and the practitioners was to discover the Philosopher's Stone, which alchemists believed was composed of a substance—the original substance of the universe—that would allow for the free transmutation of base metals into gold and silver through the use of incantations and magical utterances, creation of complex geometric patterns found in sacred geometry, and chemical experimentations to concoct different elixirs. It was also believed to be the key to immortality and that it would grant both endless happiness and health. The Stone is also credited as the key aid for the construction of ancient wonders, such as the temple of Solomon. (Holmyard 18) For alchemists, the Philosopher's Stone was symbolic of the attainment of transcendent knowledge, purity, and a return to a Golden Age of humanity in which all was malleable and unformed; it was the Magnum Opus of humanity.

In the context of Wheeler's conception of a digital physics, digital data would be the substance of the mythical Philosopher's Stone. Contemporary culture in the Information Age practices a sort of alchemy that resembles much the same goals of alchemists: they transmute everything—both base and complex—into a single substance, digital data. A curious aspect of digital data is the way interaction with it can cause it to effortlessly expand in scope and mass; hence, the importance of compression. For example, each download that occurs over the Internet produces a new copy of the digital data, causing the Internet to be an ever-expanding form or mass. Another set of examples of data expansion are the various online services and search engines, like Google, which produce new (or modify existing) data and metadata constantly to maintain accurate and relevant digital data and data sets for their user bases.

The distinction between our contemporary "alchemy" and that of medieval Hermetism and other esoteric practices, though, lies in the goal: Our production and reproduction of digital

data is not symbolic of a return to a mythic Golden Age, a beginning, but it is, rather, an extension of the present that moves towards a future in which everything inches closer to convergence.

3.3 Digital Alchemy: Processes of Data-User Interaction

So, having established this metaphor, one must ask: How does it operate on a practical level—what really makes digital data, and in turn media, alchemical in nature? The answer to that lies in the separation of structure and content that occurs with digital media. As already mentioned, DataWorks are composed of Content-Streams that are transported by Containers that maintain structures to keep the different data of various Content-Streams separated. This separation of the content and medium allow for a User to perform two distinct but related operations: the Ripping and Transcoding of Content-Streams.

To better illuminate this, consider the function and uses of digital media by two distinct groups: television broadcasters and consumers. Television broadcast companies, like satellite and digital cable companies, require highly detailed metadata for the navigation of their programming schedules, highly-compressed video and audio streams to conserve bandwidth, and possible copyright protection to secure their content. To facilitate all of these needs, a broadcast company requires a modern video container format that supports each of these features. Also, highly compressed content-streams may require the use of a proprietary codec – a coder/decoder program— for video and audio encoding (which may also require the use of a proprietary file format) to achieve the desired results, which usually translate into a consumer requiring a broadcast company's proprietary hardware to access their provided content.[10]

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[10] Microsoft defines a codec as follows:

> A codec is software that is used to compress or decompress a digital media file, such as a song or video. Windows Media Player and other programs use codecs to play and create digital media files.
>
> A codec can consist of two components: an encoder and a decoder. The encoder performs the compression (encoding) function and the decoder performs the decompression (decoding) function. Some codecs include both of

In contrast to a broadcast company's needs, a consumer at home may not care or require highly detailed metadata and bandwidth constraints may also not be a concern. However, a consumer may want to use their digital media on a variety of devices (a personal computer, a portable media player, a television, etc.) and would need their data to be encoded using a standardized and/or open-source codec that is available on a variety of hardware and operating systems. For a consumer to achieve these goals, they can rip and/or transcode the content-streams. Ripping is the extraction and copying of digital media streams that are packaged within a container. An example of ripping would be taking the audio stream from a multi-media container like an AVI file and placing into an audio-only container like WAV, XMF, or AIFF. Other examples of ripping involve the creation of a digital copy from a physical medium like a CD or DVD, known as a "disc image" since it replicates the structures of an actual physical disc. Transcoding is "the direct digital-to-digital conversion from one encoding scheme… to a different encoding scheme" (FCC) for the content-streams within a container format. Transcoding sometimes also involves the placement of content-streams into a different container format. An example of transcoding would be the conversion of the audio stream in an AVI from an uncompressed WAV-format to a compressed MP3-format for a smaller file size. Another example would be the re-encoding of a content-stream from a proprietary codec to a standardized and/or open source codec.

However, a more active User, such as a podcaster, will require some of the needs of both a broadcast company and consumer to be facilitated. For example, a podcaster may desire some level of copyright protection for their intellectual property and also for their content to be

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these components and some codecs only include one of them.

For example, when you rip a song from an audio CD to your computer, the Player uses the Windows Media Audio codec by default to compress the song into a compact WMA file. When you play that WMA file (or any WMA file that might be streamed from a website), the Player uses the WindowsMedia Audio codec to decompress the file so the music can be played through your speakers.

accessible on a variety of devices. In such cases a podcaster may make use of multiple container formats, such as having audio content played online stored in a format such as Flash but downloaded in MP3 or MP4 format.

What these processes translate to with DataWorks and Users are the beginnings of the underlying structures for a digitally-based rhetorical framework. First, there would be the Container-like elements, which would be the overall structures that can do one or more of the following with the content: transport, frame, and/or direct—they act as the interface. Next, there are the Content-Streams that are Rippable. Ripping, as a process, poses the question: What does a User take from the content? As a process, Ripping is closest to the idea of User intention, though in some instances may be better described as motivation. One way to understand what that means is through the already existing methods that focus on identifying individual elements in a Work/Text, such as Kenneth Burke's Dramatist Pentad.[11] However,

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[11] Dramatism is a rhetorical method that interprets the world as theatre, taking the famous quote by Shakespeare, "All the world's a stage," literally —life is a drama.

One of the key features of Dramatism is the Dramatistic Pentad. The Pentad is a tool of analysis to determine the Motive and methods of persuasion used by a speaker, a "character". The Pentad is employed by dividing social situations into five rhetorical structures to determine the worldview of a "character" by answering several questions. The Pentad consists of the five following structures:

1. The Act "names what took place, in thought or deed." (Burke XV) Answers the questions: What happened or what will happen? What is currently happening? What was spoken or thought?
2. The Scene is "the background of act, the situation in which it occurred." (Burke XV) Answers the questions: When and where did the Act occur? What is the background information of the Act? This portion focuses on the context of the Act.
3. The Agent is "the person or kind of person [who] performed the act." (Burke XV). Answers the questions: Who performed the Act? What is the role of the Agent?
4. Agency is "the means or instruments [the agent] used." (Burke XV) Answers the question: How did the Agent perform the Act? This portion focuses on the methodology of the Act or Agent.
5. Purpose. Answers the questions: Why was the Act performed? What does the Agent want? This portion focuses on the goal and/or meaning of the Act.

The emphasis on particular structures in the Pentad points towards the "character" possessing, on a general level, one of several philosophic worldviews: Realism (Act), Materialism (Scene), Idealism (Agent), Pragmatism (Agency), Mysticism (Purpose). (Burke 128) These are divided further based on the specific context of the dramatic situation.

unlike these existing methods, the focus should not be solely on the underlying rhetorical impetus, such as the case with the motive of Burke's Dramatism and Pentad. What should be focused on, instead, is identifying elements that engage and disengage a User (or group of Users). One method for identifying such elements is examining the structures and/or content that is similar, dissimilar, or unchanged within a wide range of Content-Streams of particular DataWork types as a means of establishing the conventions of those various DataWork types and User groups. Now, although the focus of this work is on rhetorical principles, removing the rhetorical element from Ripping allows for this process to be applied to a wider range of techniques by giving the User the freedom to shape the Content-Streams into other forms after extraction; if there is already a rhetorical element present, then the content extracted will lend itself to rhetoric, and possibly only rhetoric. This ability to shape and re-form Content Streams is related to the idea of Transcoding.

Transcoding is the quintessential goal for User interaction with DataWorks. What Transcoding means in the context of DataWorks is the ability for a User to take the Ripped Content-Streams that have been identified and encode them into a new form or to place these Streams within a different Container (medium, genre, or structure). These forms may be rhetorical, such as with Burke's Pentad, or a different Container, such as going from text to images (or vice-versa) or moving from one genre to another. So, Transcoding within this framework consists of the processes and methodologies employed by Users to manipulate various Content Stream to achieve a synthesis of diverse forms of DataWorks (or, in a traditional context, texts) into a single, yet multifaceted, expression. From here, these processes can be applied to the generation of either traditional texts or digital compositions. This process of DataWork manipulation follows loose and simple methods that result in compositions that have a simple appearance that shrouds their weight and complexity and capacity as rhetorical products. As a result, Transcoding allows Users to create DataWorks and texts that facilitate the

various levels of discourse and audiences that encounter their works by shifting and transforming Content Streams in multiple ways.

In later sections, I will discuss the manners in which Users engage in these different processes as I examine and dissect different examples of DataWorks.

CHAPTER 4

THE TREACHERY OF DIGITAL

The following sections are going to cover some theoretical aspects of a digital ontology as it relates to the fundamental nature of a Data-User paradigm and provides various aspects to consider when interpreting DataWorks or User groups. The general flow of this portion will alternate between the focus between Data and User.

4.1 Simulacrum and Data

> If *once* we were able to view the Borges fable in which the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly (the decline of the Empire witnesses the fraying of this map, little by little, and its fall into ruins, though some shreds are still discernible in the deserts—the metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction testifying to a pride equal to the Empire and rotting like a carcass, returning to the substance of the soil, a bit as the double ends by being confused with the real through aging) —as the most beautiful allegory of simulation, this fable has now come full circle for us, and possesses nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra. (Baudrillard, Precession 1732)

Baudrillard's Simulacrum deals with hyper-reality, a state in which the image—a representation of something in reality—has replaced that which it represents; the image has become more real than the actual object. Raw information, data free of meaning or interpretation, is based on abstraction; data are meant to be an accurate measure and representation of *something*.

Take a graphical image that has been generated by (or reproduced on) a computer. Such an image (if it is a bitmap) will be composed of many pixels, which are the smallest

element of information in such an image and are assigned a color generated based on a color model.[12] [13]

The RGB color model, which is the standard for computer and other related displays, at a 24-bits-per-pixel of color depth can produce millions of colors (16,777,216 or $(2^8)^3$ to be exact).[14] Many of the colors produced from the 24-bit color depth are either out of the visible range of the human eye or produced at such high accuracy as to be indistinguishable from closely related colors. This property of the 24-bit color depth range is somewhat curious since it is generally called “True Color” and there are even broader color depth ranges.

To illustrate this point, consider the PNG lossless-compression encoding format. A user is given the option to use a 32-, 48-, and 64-bit color depth for their images when encoded into the PNG format. In this case, the 32-bit color depth is technically a misnomer, as it does not add more color depth, but instead adds an additional 8-bit channel for the calculation of color transparency (known as an alpha channel) to the 24-bit True Color depth. The 48-bit color depth, however, is not a misnomer and encodes the RGB channels using a 16-bit integer value for each component; such a high integer value translates into the ability to produce trillions of colors (281,474,976,710,656 or $(2^{16})^3$ to be exact). The 64-bit color depth, like the 32-bit option, is also misnomer and, similarly, adds a 16-bit alpha channel to the 48-bit RGB channels.(Roelofs)

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[12] There are a variety of image graphic types besides bitmaps, such as vector graphics.

[13] A color model is the application of color theory in the arts. Examples include subtractive color models, like Red-Yellow-Blue or Cyan-Magenta-Yellow-Key (Black), which are used for mixing different saturations and amounts of paints, dyes, or inks to create a range of colors. Other models are additive like Red-Green-Blue, which are based on mixing different intensities of colored light together to create a range of colors.

[14] Color depth is calculated by the size of integers that can occur for each color component value in a color model; red-green-blue in the case of the RGB color model. For a 24-bit depth RBG model, it uses an 8-bit integer value (0 to 255) for each color component. So, the RGB values (0, 0, 0) would be a completely black pixel while the RGB values (255, 0, 0) would be a completely red pixel.

A bit, or binary digit, is calculated as follows in binary number usage: 2^bit-level. So, in the case of an 8-bit integer value, that translates to a number range of 2^8, or 256. Computer systems begin ‘counting’ from 0 rather than 1 when counting since they use binary numbers, hence why the range of values for RGB components are 0 to 255 and not 1 to 256.

What does this mean for DataWorks? Quite simply that DataWorks are able to take abstraction to another level, to another realm where digital data and information are almost indistinguishable from what it represents; it treads near the realm of simulacrum. A 24-bit and higher color depth image may be the makings of a simulacrum, at least the visual aspects, but only if the viewers—the Users—of such an image take the pixels as *being* the color instead of what they actually are: a collected series of integers that describe multiple components of light that are meant to represent a color as accurately as possible. This scenario is akin to one of the works by French painter René Magritte, *La trahison des images*, shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**, which translates to "The Treachery of Images." *The Treachery of Images* is a painting that depicts a pipe with the caption "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," which translates to "This is not a pipe." This statement is true; it is *not* a pipe but an image of a pipe.

Figure 4.1 Image of *La trahison des images*

However, such an assessment itself is not completely true either since the painting can be further abstracted and described more accurately as a series of paints with varying pigments, tints, and tones that *appear* to be arranged into the shape of a pipe. If this line of thinking is taken further and further it will, in theory, reach a final abstraction that accurately and fully describes what the actual image is. DataWorks may be able to reach that final abstraction as the digital data that comprises such a composition increases in the accuracy and range of descriptors. Imagine the analogy of the Borges' fable of the mapped empire. The map in the fable was continually expanded and, as a result, became increasingly detailed until it finally

reached a point where it was able to replace the whole of the empire. There is a similar effect that occurs with digital data: it grows constantly, creating a massive single pool of information. From this pool, all shapes, colors, sounds, motions, and so on can be *pulled* forth as information, as DataWorks.

It is this need for interaction that is important. Users are always aware that the representations extrapolated from digital data are only "reflection[s] of a basic reality." (Baudrillard, Precession 1736) Users are aware that it is their own actions with digital data that create representations that "masks and perverts a basic reality" (Baudrillard, Precession 1736) and not the DataWork alone that perverts reality. The User is always aware that what is presented before them can be re-shaped into a new representation.

Thus, simulacra may be constructed from digital data, but that data is itself not a simulacrum. Reaching the final abstraction may be the makings of a "true" hyper-reality but that hyper-reality will always have a border that is made apparent by the interactions the User base performs on the digital data. A DataWork-derived hyper-reality will reach the second, third, and fourth phases of simulacrum only when the User-base no longer interacts with the DataWorks via the examination, inspection, deconstruction, and reconstruction of said DataWorks, and instead taking a role of passive receptor for it; in such cases, DataWorks will no longer exist as data but instead be a new reality.

Yes, a new reality. Such a notion may sound cliché, and nothing like a new idea, and you are correct in such thinking—it is not a new idea. But, although the idea evokes the vision of virtual cyberspace from Cyberpunk novels, that is only the most extreme form of what I am describing. Virtual reality (VR) may compete with (and possibly even seek to replace) actual reality, but at the moment, it is the least worrisome form due to technological limitations. No, what I am talking about is a different, *softer* form of a new reality, one that is, ironically, free of an interface and less apparent (the goal of virtual reality for data manipulation and computing) all the while being totally visible. The new reality is an augmented reality (AR), and it has

already begun to form and reach towards the total fourth order simulacrum of VR, think of it as a preview for a possible VR-centric world.

The AR of today is the product of the meta-modern era that has emerged from the constant bombardment of data that Users experience, which has culminated in a very clear awareness of the nature and mechanics of DataWorks, of the artificiality of representation. From this awareness has come a sense of mastery over DataWorks that has resulted in an increasing lack of interest in the nature and mechanics of digital media—why be concerned with things that are boring, passé, cliché? As a result, Users have unknowingly become more slothful and passive in their viewing of media, more detached in their reception of content, and with an increasing sense of entitlement in regards to convenience—all data must always be available, always immediately consumable, always obvious in nature and *intention*. These different expectations of media are becoming the expectations of *all* things, even when it is practically impossible to have such convenience and transparency. The expectation of convenience, whether the result of either underlying desires or conditioning or some combination of both, is having other, deeper impacts on the degree and forms of User-Data interaction. Users are consuming massive amounts of Data as the result of the convenient access available and, thus, creating more and more demand on content creators, who have decided to fulfill these demands and barrage Users with multiple, always-on streams of Data. This glut of Data is, ironically, placing more demands on Users, creating an addiction-like situation for them in which they have little time to carefully consider or examine the Data they are consuming—and why should they? Users *believe* they understand Data.

The combination of this situation and the User's belief have resulted in lazier viewing and media reception, such as automatically interpreting Data that is linked to the real world—news media, political narratives, sports competition narratives, celebrity tweets, reality programming, etc.—as having some degree of authenticity and relevance, even when Users are aware on an intellectual level that data can be (and is) manufactured and produced to create a

sense of authenticity and relevance to a viewer. And, honestly, why should Users even take the time to really consider how true things are? A thing being true is not even relevant; at least that is what the post-modern era taught everyone.

The contemporary development of more simplified post-pc platforms and meta-platforms are compounding these dynamics. For example, the walled-garden approach of Apple iOS that aims to make mobile and portable computing devices into appliances rather than have them existing as gadgets. They turn on instantly, their functions are streamlined, and the interface is minimal and consistent throughout the platform and across software applications. Users of these devices do not have to concentrate on learning how to interact with Data, nor do they really have many options beyond the channels of Data access. For iOS devices, productivity (though possible to a degree) is not really an aim at all; the aim is an unencumbered media experience. The aim is to be always on, always connected, always receiving Data, but never being told—or even asked—to generate or examine Data.

4.2 Simulacrum and Users

> "Where Du Bois saw duality and Mingus imagined a trinity, I would say that the twenty-first-century self is so fully immersed in and defined by the data that surrounds it, we are entering an era of multiplex consciousness." (Miller 64)

Multiplexing is a process or method for combining various streams of data or signals into a single unit. The term comes up often when dealing with the extraction or transcoding of digital data (especially digital video and physical media like DVD) and the extraction of specific data streams from a container, such as the audio or subtitles in a video container. So, when Paul D. Miller, a disc jockey and music artist better known as DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid (or simply DJ Spooky), says that people in this age should think of the self as being a multiplex consciousness, he is saying identity is an active creation of the person; they are constantly streaming together and separating different threads of data to create a hybrid-identity that reflects and expands the various cultures in which people participate. Users do not just remix

DataWorks they also remix themselves. This identity remixing is what I call Avatar-Creation and it involves the creation of various personae, which are observable on many levels and in different contexts. To be fully clear, an Avatar is defined as the personal-image(s) or personas a User creates through their actions in various hyper-linked spaces and communities online, whereas Identity refers to the actual User as they exist in the "real" world. Or, to put it in terms parallel to the discussion on DataWorks, an Avatar is a representation of User Identity. However, even though an Avatar is comprised of different pieces of data, an Avatar is not specifically the same as a DataWork and may be more accurately thought of as also being a type of Metadata for a User, since an Avatar represents some aspect *about* the User. For these reasons, an Avatar functions in some of the same ways as a DataWork.

User Avatars range from non-persistent personae to highly-persistent personae. In the cases of a non-persistent Avatar, a User is completely or near-completely anonymous, like on the image board 4chan.org (4chan). A forum like 4chan has a special ecosystem: there is no user registration or user name attached to posts, meaning there there are no built in means for the user-base to form a singular persona for each User without the use of external technologies or services, such as the use of Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels or linking to a social network or using a separate forum that does involve registration. Because of this lack of ability to create a singular persona, the Avatar of an anonymous User becomes based on the actions of the community as a whole. An example of this can be seen on certain sub-forums of 4chan like the /b/ forum, which is the random image portion of 4chan. Due to the highly inflammatory and/or absurd nature of the content on the /b/ forum, the various Users that populate /b/ are referred to as /b/tards. Also, arising from 4chan and other forums and online communities like YouTube and IRC, is a group of Users known aptly as Anonymous.

The actions of Anonymous range from Internet pranks and highly-inflammatory trolls to Internet-driven vigilantism and hackerism to real-world hacktivism, all of which arise from the fact that the group has no specific goals; in general, the only thing linking these actions is an

emphasis on creating absurd chaos online in what are known as raids. Raids, which generally fall under hackerism since they are generally apolitical (or lack a cohesive political ideology beyond some sort of anarchism) due to the decentralized nature of the group, consist of a wide array of things, such as trolling forums and other online communities that will be easily offended to performing DDoS attacks to cause a website or service to crash.[15] More specific examples of raids include “attacks” in 2006 and 2007 raids on Habbo Hotel, a social networking site that uses a virtual hotel and animated avatars for user interactions. These raids consisted of a mass of Anonymous registering on Habbo Hotel and making avatars that had the following traits: brown skin, grey suits, sunglasses, and an afro hair style. Anonymous used their avatars to block entrance ways to certain areas, such as pools and doorways, while "yelling" phrases like 'POOL CLOSED DUE TO AIDS' and forming designs that most people would find inflammatory, such as swastikas. Why would a group of Users do this, what is their motivation for the raid? Several Users have claimed the raid occurred as a result of the, seemingly random, banning of different Habbo Hotel users who have non-white avatars. Anonymous took these banning’s to indicate that racists moderate the Habbo Hotel service, hence the use of black avatars and the formation of swastikas and other events during the raid. How true such a claim is unclear and unverifiable, as such it is more likely that the raid was done for laughs and to offend Habbo Hotel users. In other instances, raids spill over into the real world, such as with the hackerism-driven trolling of Oprah's internet forums in September 2008 in which members of Anonymous registered and posted fake stories about molesting children and distributing child pornography. The trolling of her forums led Oprah to believe Anonymous was an actual organized and known network of pedophiles and resulted in her saying a variation of a popular meme (OVER 9000!)

[15] DDOS stands for “domain denial of service” and consists of flooding a network server with requests to force it into an unusable state.

and a common Anonymous tagline on the air when referring to the group: "...It does not forgive, it does not forget. This group has over 9,000 penises, and they're all raping children."[16][17][18]

In contrast with the hackerism driven raids cited above, there are more hacktivist driven raids that have an actual political goal to be achieved. One of these efforts, known as Project Chanology, led to groups of Anonymous performing several coordinated and very absurd protests against the Church of Scientology (CoS) all over the world. Project Chanology resulted in thousands of Users from Anonymous appearing in masks and with signs and other things while chanting nonsensical Internet memes, all the while claiming that CoS is a cult and is damaging to society at large. Reasons cited by some Users include the attempted censorship of YouTube by CoS (which invoved a Scientology-produced video that features a Tom Cruise interview being posted on the video sharing site) and the death of Lisa McPherson in 1995 while under the care of the CoS. Other examples of hacktivism performed by certain segments of Anonymous occurred in 2009 during the Iranian Voter Protests, in which Users from Anonymous worked to keep the flow of information about the protests and elections from being censored, were much more serious and mostly used the rhetoric of Anonymous —emphasis on the freedom of information akin to groups like the Pirate Party. These actions have led to 4chan, as a whole, to be associated with Anonymous and the User-base labeled as either a negative and chaotic group (some combination of trolls, pranksters, racists, and/or idiots) or as a benevolent and neutral to positive group (some combination of vigilante, pranksters, and/or freedom fighter). Neither of these labels are accurate descriptors of Anonymous and,

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[16] "Over 9000!" refers to a line from the anime series *Dragon Ball Z* (DBZ) in which a character, Vegeta, remarks that another character, Goku, has a power level over 9000 -which in DBZ terms at the time was the equivalent of saying that Goku was unbelievable powerful. The phrase is commonly used to refer to an unbelievable large quantity of things. The humor of the meme, though, is based on the fact that near the end of the series characters have power-levels in the range of hundreds of millions, yet none of the characters act surprised by this at all anymore and take it as a common occurrence.

[17] Anonymous uses hyperbolic statements often. A common one is "Anonymous is Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget."

[18] A YouTube sound clip of Oprah: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7liYfhRgXGk

furthermore, Anonymous is comprised of more than just the 4chan users. It would be more correct to think of Anonymous as nobody and, as such, can be anybody and, thus, able to occupy any role that one would desire.

Partially persistent Avatars arise from communities and spaces that involve the creation of a user name and maintain some record of the user-bases actions and interactions, such as forums and online services and certain games. These types of ecosystems allow for a User to create one or more singular Avatars that act as a mask over the 'real' self or identity of the User. In these instances, Avatars allow a User to interact with other Users in a novel way that may be more open, active, and/or aggressive—or the polar opposite of these types. Good examples of partially persistent Avatars are the characters created in massive-multiplayer online games (MMOG), such as the Role Playing Games (RPG) Everquest and World of Warcraft. In these MMORPG's, there is an emphasis and requirement on the use of coordinated forces to complete various tasks in the games, such as defeating extremely powerful enemies. Because of this, players must maintain a reputation of being a competent and trustworthy player. Being known as a good player increases that players chances of taking part in the defeating of powerful enemies; one way this is achieved is by becoming part of an organized team that is composed of other "good" players (known as guilds or clans in many games). Other examples of socialization are related to the sharing of information about the in-game world, such as the location of special areas or how to complete tasks/quests, which allows players to fully experience the virtual space in which they are playing.

Although the designers of these games were aware of the social aspect of their games—there are interface and command elements for grouping, forming guilds, and sending messages and chatting—they did not always have the most optimal means of managing a large team, such as actually scheduling events, or any tools for keeping notes on the game world. One way players overcame these issues was the creation of forums and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels to communicate outside of the game world and the creation of large websites

(and eventually databases) about the various areas and other items in the game world. Eventually, these became not just game-related spaces but communities. Over time, these communities became a sort of loose-archive in which players traded information about not just the game world but also about other players, such as known gankers or the achievements of particular players or groups and (of course) confrontations and arguments.[19]

What resulted from this information sharing was the transformation of player characters into potentially-persistent Avatars to be used outside of a game's world. In the case of the game world, a player would only really encounter a certain percentage of the population and not really know much about other players except based on the persistent information of the character that is displayed in the form of acquired items (such as their visible weapons or armor which come from specific areas and with specific achievements) and association with other players via guilds. Out-of-game actions extended the scope of player interaction and allowed players that may not even encounter each other in game to interact outside of that realm or add different forms of topical conversation that extend beyond the game world, revealing different portions of a players personality. These processes of interacting in and out of game continue on and repeat themselves for long periods of time, resulting in a player gaining a semi-persistent Avatar to be used in online communities. So, to simplify these last few chunks of information, a partially or potentially persistent Avatar is the result of partially documented events in various online spaces taking on an archival aspect in these same (or possibly other) spaces, which is the perceived representation of a User's identity.

In contrast to non-persistent and partially/potentially-persistent Avatars that are either linked to the actions of a group (or groups) of Users or the archived data about a User, highly-

[19] Ganker is a term used to describe a player that engages in player-vs-player combat only when it is advantageous to them, such as a group of players attacking a solo-player or a single player attacking a player that is weakened from player-vs-environment combat or simply attacking innately weaker player characters; this is known as 'getting ganked.' The term originates from slang terms about stealing, likely since, in games like EverQuest, a player was able to take some items or currency from a player they had defeated in combat.

persistent Avatars are directly linked to a User's actual and "real" identity. Examples of this include social networking sites like Facebook that have created an ecosystem in which people use their actual names and openly post images of themselves and the activities they engage in. The other main element of these highly-persistent Avatars is the fact that the User cannot as readily abandon these Avatars since they are so closely tied to a User's actual identity; with partially persistent Avatars, the User can much more easily divorce themselves from the personae portrayed by simply abandoning that Avatar since leaving behind no connections other than the user-name is something that can be much more easily done with non- and partially-persistent Avatars.

One would assume that the difficulty in breaking a connection between a User and Highly-Persistent Avatar would lead to a User's only sharing content that is extremely biased and rhetorically minded to create an ideal or desired persona but, more often than not, the opposite proves true. This lack of rhetorical shaping of personal information is demonstrated by User-originated content sites like Failbook and Lamebook that document events that display some of the most negative qualities of Users, which range from the minor (like poor grammar and spelling) to the severe (like racist remarks or nude images), and there have even been several small studies on User habits which have found that "college-age users of Facebook in the United States…typically present accurate versions of their personalities" (Bower) on sites like Facebook; the profiles on social networks really are reflective of a User's actual personality (or at least aspects of it). In these instances, it is probably more appropriate to think of highly-persistent Avatars as an augmented version of a User's identity. From that perspective, though, all of these supposed un-rhetorical postings that Users make with their Highly-Persistent Avatars might, in fact, be rhetorical. Consider the constant need by the Users of 4chan.org to out-do other Users in the community in terms of shock value. It may be that a similar phenomenon has occurred with Highly-Persistent Avatars, in which Users now want to be

viewed as crass and unfiltered and, therefore, choose to turn up the shock value of their most visible personae, essentially bidding to become the next Tucker Max or Maddox.[20]

Now, it is important to realize that the issue here is one of perception and paranoia: Does one assume that rhetorical moves represent only deception—sophistry—or, instead, take a more nuanced approach? Ideally, nuance is the choice, as rhetoric is not inherently deceptive, but the malleable nature of digital data makes nuance increasingly hard, especially when identity poses a factor that I have not even brought into the situation: self-deception. It may very well be that all of these online activities, the various postings on social networks and forums and so on, come from genuine, sincere beliefs and opinions that the individual holds and, in the User's opinion, is representing themselves accurately. However, how many of these various Users have taken the time to examine their own opinions and ideas and weighed them against their actions and choices in the world—both real and unreal—and taken a look at the difference? Furthermore, how many Users have examined the online activities of those that they interact with on a regular basis? And that is the root of the issue: at this point it is impossible to quantify the reality of persistent personae without interacting with them in the *real* world.

Another important factor to consider at this point is the significance of the actions associated with these augmented, persistent personae. Actions that occur on the web are being increasingly perceived as significant in the real world. Consider how CNN now displays Twitter and Facebook feeds during stories. Random Users that likely have no expertise on a particular topic, and who rarely provide more than the most superficial insights on most issues, are placed on par with panels of supposed professionals and experts at CNN. Such choices by CNN, ultimately, undermine their credibility as a news and opinion source (which may be a factor in

[20] Tucker Max and Maddox (George Ouzounian) are both online "celebrities" that became popular for their crass, humorous blogs. Max began his blog in 2002 and used it to document his drunken, frat boy-like adventures and sexual conquests, priding himself on being an asshole throughout his stories. Maddox began his blog in 1997 with humorous posts criticizing things like the artwork of children, feminism, vegetarianism, the hate mail he often received, and much more. Due to the popularity of their blogs, both would go on to receive book deals and proceed into other media ventures.

their decreasing viewership and ratings). In the case of evaluating a User's actual personality, the significance of online actions has reached a point that they are now perceived as near-equal to actions in the real world. Now, I am not saying that I think activities online are unimportant (I wouldn't be writing this at all if that was the case) but to highlight what I see as a lack of balance in what is perceived in regards to online interaction because this lack of balance is resulting in an increased confusion of reality, of simulacrum; which is not necessarily a bad thing (ambiguity can add extra dimensions or complexity to a subject) but it most definitely is not a good thing if Users are not aware of it.

And, ironically, the means that keep DataWorks from becoming simulacrum are what *cause* Avatars to become simulacrum. This paradox is likely due to the fact that Avatars, being comprised from the data Users share, are, in a way, like a DataWork (and can be interpreted as such) but are perceived not as a DataWork, or even as the Metadata of a User, but instead as the *actual* User. The interactions with User Avatars are thus associated with the actual User and imbibe them with qualities and experiences that we normally only associate with actual people. This conundrum is actually part of the 2010 documentary, *Catfish*, though the films designation as a "documentary" is suspect, in my opinion.[21]

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[21] The question of whether Catfish is a 'real' documentary, in my opinion, has a clear answer: it is not real (or at least not totally real) and to believe it is a documentary requires a suspension of disbelief that borders on the insane. A blog post by Scott Hutcheson points out many of the issues with the validity of the film as a documentary.

First, the brothers manage to capture every important moment in Nev's relationship to create the narrative of the film. During the filming of the documentary, Nev's brother Ariel is busy running his own production company working on other projects, yet has no issue with capturing all of these moments; Ariel claims that he simply enjoys filming his brother because he is "very cinematic." Second, the original subject of the film is supposed to be Abby due to her paintings and claims by Angela that she is a local celebrity with paintings all over town. Ariel, at no point, thinks to verify these claims before beginning this project? Third, in a related point that Hutcheson overlooks, members of Abby's family claim to be models and have professionally done photos of their work on their Facebook profiles, which provide a clear point to examine for the validity of any of these claims, yet no one ever considers investigating these claims made by complete strangers. Fourth, the brothers apparently have no problem finding the source of the photographs for Angela and Megan's profile pictures and photo albums, which came from the New York-based photographer and model Aimee Gonzalez. Coincidentally, as pointed out by Hutcheson, Aimee also photographs some of the same subject matter as Nev: dancers. Fifth,

The premise of the "documentary" is an examination of a budding online relationship between Nev Schulman, a photographer from New York, and Megan Wesselman, an attractive dancer and songwriter from Michigan, as some *fishy* details arise. Nev initially interacts with Megan's younger half-sister, Abby Pierce (who is an eight-year-old painter), via mail; Abby uses a photograph taken by Nev as a reference image for one of her paintings and sends it to him. Initially, Abby is supposed to be the focus and reason for the making of the documentary, but this shifts after Nev becomes friends with Abby on Facebook. Nev, after friending Abby on Facebook, becomes friends with the rest of Abby's family, which includes Megan, and various friends of the family, including their mother Angela Wesselman-Pierce. From here, Nev has different online interactions with this network of people (he sees their photo albums and status updates, which are frequent) and has many conversations with Megan specifically over email, the phone, and Facebook. The fishiness begins to occur after Megan sends Nev MP3 files of her song performances: all of the songs are from other people on YouTube. The songs, combined with other events, lead Nev to be suspicious of the relationship but his brother, Ariel (who is producing and filming the documentary), insists that Nev continues the relationship and meet Megan in person. The two brothers, plus a friend helping with the documentary production, make a surprise visit to the home of Megan's mother Angela and step-father, Vince, in Michigan and make a startling discovery: the mother and father are not the people from the photos they had seen on Facebook. As the rest of the documentary unravels, it is found that Megan's mother, Angela, has created all of these different profiles on Facebook, taken photos

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the only defense the brothers have ever made about the authenticity of the film is that they are "not that smart" (Brodie) to be able to write the whole script and that Angela Wesselman-Pierce was able to dupe them very easily.

The claim about the script is likely true and has led me to my hypothesis of the validity of the film as a documentary: Angela really did deceive Nev to some degree and Nev figured it out. After that point, Ariel and Nev decided to create a film from the deception story and frame it as a documentary and recreate the events, as the validity of the film adds a dimension and deeper resonance to the story of the film. This assumes that Angela is partially complicit in the film or was used by the brothers, though based on her personality (and the assumption that she is a deceptive person) it is not a stretch to assume she is complicit with the brothers in the film.

from various sources, and been updating the statuses as needed, creating this ongoing narrative of life in Michigan as a relationship forms between Megan and Nev. Furthermore, Angela is also the one who made all the paintings and talked with Nev over the phone—we never see Megan at all and, to my knowledge, does not exist (though Angela insists she is real)—and is clearly in love with Nev. At the end of the film, Angela deletes the different profiles and changes the photo on her actual profile.

Assuming that *Catfish* is an actual documentary, this demonstrates the realm of simulacrum that interacting with supposedly 'real' people online produces. Of course, even with the safer assumption that *Catfish* is a well-produced fake documentary, the message persists. This finally point about the role of interaction brings us to an intriguing intersection: the relation of interface to Data and User.

CHAPTER 5

DIRECTED INTERACTIONS

5.1 Containers and Avatars as Interface

How do Users interact with DataWorks? How do Users interact with other Users? Is everything that Users do based purely on their own impulses? In some ways yes since Users do dictate to themselves, for a variety of reasons, what they deem important when dealing with DataWorks and other Users. However, it is clear that Users also have some expectations of the intended meaning or use of DataWorks, which affects the manner in which they will interact with the DataWork. In computer science an interaction between different components (hardware and software for computers) is described as interfacing.

So what exactly is an interface? The form of interface that most Users are familiar with is not from computer science but from the field of design: the user interface. An example of a user interface is the graphic user interface (GUI) of popular computer operating systems (OS) like OS X or Windows. GUI's are created to provide visual metaphors for various functions to help facilitate a User's interaction with different kinds of data or application. In the case of OS X and Windows, they use the metaphor of the desktop to situate the User. The desktop metaphor treats the main view of the User as if it were the Users actual desktop and have icons that represent documents and folders. These icons are used to open different types of windows to navigate folders or edit documents. This creation of a series of familiar objects to help situate and direct the way a User interacts with data will be the main focus. So, with a basic understanding of what is meant by interface in the context of this paper, let's consider text and language.

When dealing with text, a reader has their knowledge of how a language functions to help direct them towards their interpretation of that text. These functions are the grammar of a

language. The combination of grammar and syntax that an author employs directs a reader and influences their interpretation by highlighting specific elements within a text. Containers, in literal usage as files on computers, act as an interface between the computers software (OS and a program or application) that the content-streams that they contain and transport. For that reason, Containers, in the context of the discussion, are to be thought of as the interface level of a DataWork, as it directs the Users interaction with the content that it contains, thus being (in essence) the grammar of a DataWork. What of Users, then? Avatars provide Metadata on a User and, as noted previously have similar properties that parallel DataWorks. As such, Avatars informs a Users interactions with other Users, meaning that it is possible to also interpret some Avatars as a type of interface and thus deepening the level that Avatars exist in when treated as a form of DataWork; in such a treatment, Avatars take on a role similar to Containers. As Metadata, Avatars contain information describing the perceived nature of the User, and, as a Container, Avatars create points of interaction between Users. The distinction between DataWork and User interfaces comes in the form of the source of the grammar. In the case of DataWorks, it is dictated by the media and modalities employed. For Users, it is dictated by the interactions and DataWorks that a community or space facilitates and propagates.

To give an idea of the ways interfaces both function and appear in DataWorks, I will discuss a medium that can be used as a link between traditional media and DataWorks: Comics. For User interfaces I will discuss the role of memetics in the propagation and cultivation of User Avatars and other forms of DataWorks and Metadata by way of interacting with DataWorks and other Users. Following each of these sections will be a section devoted to the application of these interface types for enhanced clarity.

5.2 The Visual Interface of Comics

Comics, much like the graphic-user interface of a computer's operating system, make use of windowed sections on the page —panels and gutters— to frame content and several other devices, such as icons, to help direct the flow of content. Comic panels can be further

divided with captions and the presence of various bubbles/balloons (speech and thought being the primary types), which are sub-frames of more specific content in the panel. The arrangement and construction of panels and gutters creates a dynamic that appears in DataWorks: shifting the interface elements shifts the way the different data elements —the content-streams— interact.

To illustrate this point, posit the manner in which panels and gutters are used to convey movement through space and over time in a comic. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud discusses six distinct panel-to-panel "transitions" that occur in comics: Moment-to-Moment, Action-to-Action, Subject-to-Subject, Scene-to-Scene, Aspect-to-Aspect, and Non-Sequiter. (McCloud 71-72) These transitions encompass movements that occur over a particular span of time and space. Moment-to-moment transitions, for example, cover a minuscule amount of time and space and display actions dissected down to very precise segments, creating an effect akin to animation. In contrast to this transition, Aspect-to-Aspect transitions occur over a larger span of time and space by using a roaming "eye" that goes over the whole of a subject or setting for an extended period. Now it would be easy to say that it is the content alone that creates these "transitions" between the panels but these "transitions" are only made clear based on the arrangement of the panels on a page, as the arrangement create the context of the panel and the content within that panel.

For example, let's consider a comic page that has a fairly standard panel arrangement: a 3 by 3 grid, shown in Figure 5.1. We would, as an English speaking audience, read this from the top-left panel to the top-right and proceed downwards from the top-row to the bottom-row. In instances where the panel arrangement is so clear we see little of the effect that the panel arrangement has on our reading. However, if we took this same page and changed the size of several panels, our reading can be drastically changed.

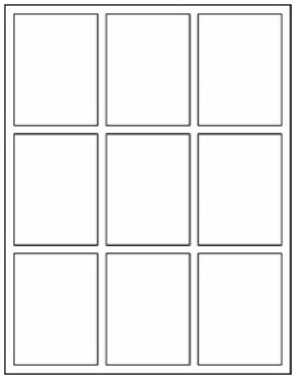

Figure 5.1 Example of a 3-by-3 grid panel arrangement

If the nine panels are arranged in a complex manner, such as in McCloud's example on page 86 of *Understanding Comics* (which is reproduced in Figure 5.2), then from the fifth to the sixth panel there is the possibility for confusion in the reading order of panels that can lead to a big shift in how a reader will interpret the "transitions." Possibly the third panel in the third row is meant to denote a break in action between simultaneous events that are occurring on the third and fourth rows, or possibly the reader is supposed to follow the tall panel after the fourth row's first panel. In either case, hopefully the content of the panels is clear enough to denote certain linearity for a clear interpretation to be formed.

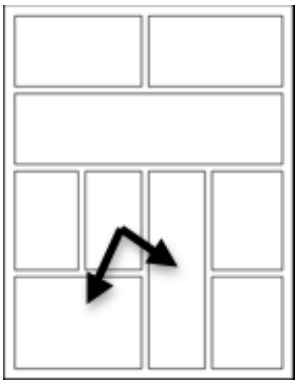

Figure 5.2 An example of a complex panel arrangement

However, reading order is not the only meaning communicated and denoted by panel arrangements. They also have the ability to control a reader's perception of importance of the content through the use of various techniques. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's masterwork

Watchmen will be used to analyse the ways these techniques function and how they are employed.

Before proceeding in that direction though, I will discuss some of the attributes of comics' other interface elements and provide a basic primer before delving into *Watchmen* extensively. As already mentioned, within panels are sub-frames of content within panels: captions and various bubbles. The primary role of captions in comics is to provide the reader with additional textual or material information, which can come in varying forms, such as narration and/or exposition or as a type of integrated note. A common technique for the use of captions is to design them in a way that denotes a specific narrative voice via a specific background and/or border colors for particular characters (or for a third-person, non-character voice). *Watchmen*, for example, uses this technique with the character Dr. Manhattan. Captions that frame narration from Dr. Manhattan have a light-blue background, which matches Dr. Manhattan's skin color, and a thick, white border. Another design technique, which is used to show the existence of a text-containing-object, is the use of textures to give a sense of "real" materiality to the caption. In Watchmen, captions of narration from Rorschach are supposed to be from his diary, so his captions have a ragged, torn appearance. These techniques will be examined in more depth in the sections on *Watchmen*.

As devices for notes, captions are often employed to create clarity in a story or of a character's history by citing particular related events and issues in a comic book series. This practice is common with superhero comics which have, due to their serialized nature and (in the case of popular titles) long publication histories, developed very long and sprawling mythos. Captions that are used for this function will tell a reader things like "*As seen in Amazing Spider-Man #200" or "*Remember what Peter Parker did in The Spectacular Spider-Man 140?" and they may be labeled "Editor's Note" or another similar title. Other uses of notes are to denote that, although the speech and narration of the comic was written (and conceived) in only one language, the character in question is actually speaking a different language. To clarify this,

think of how in some stories all characters, no matter their country (or in some cases planets) of origin, conveniently speak the same language fluently. In comics, to add a sense of “realism”, speech bubbles that contain text that should be in a different language will be placed within brackets, such as <We meet again, Wolverine.*> and have a corresponding caption that states “*Translated from Russian” or something similar to indicate a character is speaking a different language.

Bubbles have many similarities to captions due to also containing text, but differ in that they are meant to contain specific types of address, like dialogue, or the thoughts of characters (though captions have become the preferred method for conveying thought for some writers or works, like *Watchmen* for example). Bubbles employ many of the same design techniques used for captions to direct a reading, such as the use of different borders or colors for a specific character’s speech bubbles. This technique is also often employed to express a character’s particular mood, state-of-mind, or qualities of the sound of their voice. For example, characters with gruff voices may be given speech bubbles that have jagged borders. A common convention is to also use different borders to denote specific sound qualities of speech for a character at a given time, like volume. Common examples are whispered speech bubbles that use borders composed of dotted or dashed lines or shouted speech bubbles with borders that jut out as large, sharp spikes. And, of course, borders can also indicate that a bubble is a character’s thoughts by using a cloud-like border.

The last item to be discussed, icons, are generally used to refer to ‘universal’ images that can depict an idea quickly and efficiently. One of the most common icons used is an illuminating light bulb suddenly appearing over a character’s head to denote a character is experience a eureka moment and now has an idea. Now, icons are not exactly a container, but they work as an interface element by being things that stand out from the continuity of content depicted in panels and sub-panels like captions; they are not a part of the ‘physical’ space depicted in the panels on the page. Since these types of icons can convey information so

quickly, they are more common in works that have very minimal space to convey an idea, such as comic strips. Also, because these icons tend to stand out from the action at hand and create a break in the "reality" of the story, they are often found in less "serious" compositions, such as comedies, that do not focus on realism.

Of course, not all icons are 'universal' messages like the eureka light-bulb. As Scott McCloud explains, icons are often used to signify larger semantic messages and are formed though the continued use of particular images and symbols. Common icons he cites are images of the stars and stripes to denote patriotism and democracy and the insignias that appear on superhero costumes to express the characteristics of the hero, such as the Green Lantern emblem to express will power or the Super S of Superman to express absolute power or justice. In the cases of these icons, they act as symbols and signs and are a common staple among serious and longer comic compositions, including *Watchmen*.

So, now that the majority of elements for creating an interface in comics have been explained, I shall examine them in greater depth in terms of the visual grammar employed in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*.

5.2.1 The Visual Grammar of Watchmen

In the following section, I will dissect and perform an analysis of the graphic novel *Watchmen*. Although having prior knowledge of the storyline and characters may help more readily clarify the following section, knowledge of the text is not required to understand the visual grammar of *Watchmen*; the focus will be mostly on the structures rather than the content of the pages; a summary of the story is provided in the footnotes for added clarity or context for some of the items discussed in the latter portions of this section.[22]

[22] *Watchmen* is set in an alternate-reality version of America during the 1980's at the height of the Cold War in which costume vigilantes do exist, causing many shifts in the history of America and the world. At the current time of the story, costume vigilantism has been outlawed, leaving only two government sanctioned heroes still in action, and presidential term limits have been lifted, resulting in Richard Nixon remaining as president still.

Watchmen employs many deliberate and consistent design decisions that create a visual grammar for the whole work. The pages of *Watchmen* makes use of a consistent grid that

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The story begins with the investigation of a murder of a man named Edward Blake, whose death is inter-spliced as two detectives discuss the crime scene. Following this scene, a masked vigilante (known as masks in the slang of *Watchmen*), named Rorschach, investigates the crime scene and discovers that Blake is The Comedian, a former member of the Minute Men (a disbanded group of masks comprised of the characters, including Rorschach, in *Watchmen*) and who is also one of the two masks still operating under government sanction. Rorschach, who is both ultra-conservative and highly psychotic, takes Blake's death as an indication of a larger plot to kill off masks and proceeds to meet with other former Minute Men to warn them of this possible plot.

Night Owl II (Dan Drieberg), who is a middle-aged and overweight man at this point in his life, does not take the idea of a plot seriously, noting that Blake's murder could easily just be a political killing due to The Comedians work with the government; he begins to sulk after Rorschach leaves, missing his former life as a mask. The Silk Spectre II (Laurie Juspezyk), who is not fond of Blake or Rorscach, does not take the possibility of a plot seriously, likely because she is currently Dr. Manhattan's lover. Dr. Manhattan (Jon Osterman), who is a near god-like being that experiences his past/present/future simultaneously, is not concerned about the possibility of a plot (he has become increasingly detached from humanity and it's conventions), even though he admits that his vision of the future is currently clouded. Ozymandias (Adrian Veidt), dubbed the smartest man on earth, unmasked to the public years earlier and now operates the ubiquitous Veidt Corporation. Veidt is informed by Dreiberg of Rorschach's suspicions but, like the others, does not take the news seriously; similarly to Dreiberg, Veidt comments that Blake had made many enemies over the years.

Following this, Blake is buried in a military-style funeral in which each person remembers their experiences with The Comedian, revealing him as a sadistic and cynical man that reveled in the carnage of the Vietnam War and mocked plans to "save" the world (such as those concocted by Ozymandias). After the funeral, several separate but ultimately connected events occur: Dr. Manhattan is ambushed with news that he is believed to have unknowingly caused two of his close friends (one being his first wife) developing cancer, leading him to go into a self-imposed exile on Mars; Rorschach is framed for the murder of a former villain and nemesis, named Moloch, leading to him being captured by the police and placed in prison; Dreiberg and Juspezyk develop a romantic relationship and begin engaging in costumed vigilantism again; Viedt is the target of an attempted assassination, which he thwarts (the assassin swallows a cyanide capsule as he is captured by Veidt).

These events lead Drieberg and Juspezyk to begin believing Rorschach is correct about a plot related to masks and proceed to help him escape from prison and continue his investigation. Their findings reveal that each of the events that occurred (the murder of Blake, the exile of Dr. Manhattan, and imprisonment of Rorschach) were meant to clear any impedance to the plot, which is found to have been hatched by Ozymandias to end the Cold War. Ozymandias' plot involves the creation of a massive hoax: a botched alien invasion that results in the deaths of millions in the heart of New York City.

Ultimately, Ozymandias' plot is successful and, along with the death of millions in New York City, results in Rorschach death and Dr. Manhattan leaving the Earth (and the dimension of the universe) permanently. And, although the hoax does lead to the end of the Cold War, the final panel displays a copy of Rorschach's diary, which details all of the events of the story, being received by a right-wing newspaper (which he read when he was alive) known as *The New Frontiersman*.

is based on the standard three-by-three panel arrangement in which each panel is of equal height and has a width that is from one to three panels wide. So, each page will have between six to nine panels, with nine panels being the norm, an example of the most common types of panels in *Watchmen* is shown in Figure 5.3**Error! Reference source not found.**. This rigid alignment to the three-by-three grid is broken in several instances: large frame shots, issue title pages, and scenes that gain increased emphasis through the use of sequences of significance (such as key dramatic scenes that repeat themselves in slightly altered forms). These breaks create emphasis for specific events and clarify various qualities of a scene, such as time (entering a flashback or returning to the main timeline) and their relation to other scenes (two or more events occurring simultaneously).

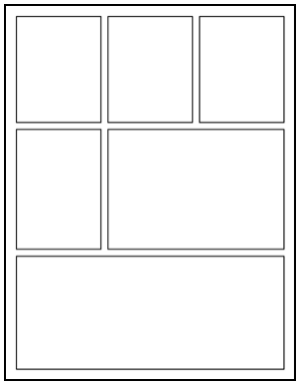
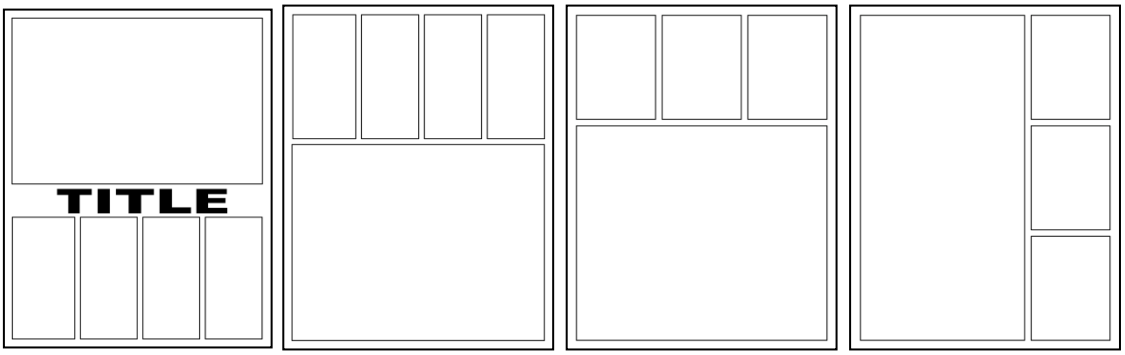


Figure 5.3 The most common types of panels in *Watchmen*

Examples of this break occur in the first issue of Watchmen on four pages (Figure 5.4 and Figure 5.5) that make use of four or five panels, rather than six to nine. Page six features a large panel followed by a row of four panels. In between the gutters on page six is the title of the issue. Page thirteen features the same format, but in reverse and without a title. Pages eighteen and twenty both employ five panels. Page eighteen has a row of three panels followed by a single large panel. Page twenty uses two columns instead of rows. The first column features a single, wide panel that covers two panels in width and three panels in height. The second column features three equally sized panels.

(a) (b) (c) (d)

Figure 5.4 Original pages from *Watchmen*, issue one. Pages (a) 8, (b) 13, (c) 18, (d) 20



(a) (b) (c) (d)

Figure 5.5 Deconstruction of pages from *Watchmen*, issue one. Pages (a) 8, (b) 13, (c) 18, (d) 20

In each of these instances, the large panel is framing a main character in the storyline; Walter Kovacs/Rorschach investigating a crime scene (Figure 5.4 (a)), Daniel Dreiberg/Nite-Owl II leaning away from his costume (Figure 5.4 (b)), Adrian Veidt/Ozymandias looking over the city with his back to his desk (Figure Figure 5.4 (c)), and a 3-story tall Jon Osterman/Dr. Manhattan standing next to a normal-sized Laurie Juspeczyk/Silk-Spectre II (Figure 5.4 (d)). What does the use of a large panel do for Moore and Gibbon's work? It widens the reader's focus to show the characters in a shared space with key items that may reveal more about the setting or characters within the story. These additional details may go unnoticed if these characters and items were put in separate panels.

For example, there is a key element about the setting revealed on page eight and eighteen (Figures 10 and 12). On page eight, Rorschach's back is to the city and a large, dome-shaped building is evident to be within a block of the Comedian's apartment. On page eighteen, Veidt is overlooking the city from his office and we see the same domed building within a few blocks of his office building. In issue seven, during a rescue mission to save the residents in a nearby tenement that is burning down, this domed building is identified as the Astrodome, a fictional building within the story; the Astrodome is mentioned one other time when it used as the site of a televised charity event hosted by Veidt, who performs a gymnastics exhibition in his Ozymandias costume.

During the finale of the comic, in issues eleven and twelve, we witness the nuclear-like explosion that occurs in New York City happening down the block from Madison Square Garden—just a few blocks from the Comedian's apartment. From these various elements, a reader can discern the close-proximity in which the majority of the events of the comic occur, which creates a sense of the clash of poverty and wealth that occurs in an urban landscape. In an interview, Moore explained how the actions of President Nixon, Dr. Manhattan, and Adrian Veidt "…affect[ed] the people on the street corner but only peripherally, indirectly." (Kraft 37) This peripheral view is what we see of the city from these specific panels. It is a very small and dense space within the world of the story, but it is ultimately the whole point of the narrative—the (in Moore's perspective) negative affect of "super" powers on normal people—as it is the center of the unfolding of Ozymandias' plot.

In terms of creating a background for characters, page eighteen (Figure 5.4 (c)**Error! Reference source not found.**) shows Veidt's desk littered with several action-figures of his former masked-vigilante persona and a newspaper with a headline that mentions the Doomsday clock being 5-minutes to midnight. This scene gains more traction as the reader progresses through the story and sees how ubiquitous Veidt Industries is and the ways in which Veidt works to shape human culture on a global scale. For example, Veidt distributes a self-improvement

booklet called *The Veidt Method*, makes public appearances as Ozymandias to perform acrobatic exhibitions, and is even described as “the smartest man on earth.” (Issue 1, Page17, panel 2)

By framing these elements in a large panel the reader is given an immediate direction to take note of these elements and to take notice of the similar elements that are introduced at later points in the story. By paying attention to the direction given, a reader will more readily recognize the egotistical nature of Veidt and his attempts to create a cult of personality that will allow him to shape and control society at large. The visual grammar of *Watchmen* is further developed in later issues such as in issue two. Issue two adds a layer of complexity to the storytelling of *Watchmen* in the form of flashbacks, examples from the issue are shown in Figures 5.6 (a), (b), and (c). The series of panels on these pages create a sense of motion, a zooming effect, as the focus comes closer to each characters face. These sequences create a transition for the story as the narrative shifts into the past. The use of large panels at the end of the sequence adds clarity to the issues narrative by explicitly denoting the beginning of a flashback and, furthermore, indicating that the flashback involves a significant interaction between the pictured character and the Comedian.

(a) (b) (c)

Figure 5.6 Pages from *Watchmen*, issue two. Pages (a) 9, (b) 12, and (c) 16

Other examples include the use of particular panel layouts for specific types of sequences or sequences with related content, such as Dan Dreiberg’s dream sequence on

page sixteen of issue seven, shown in Figure 5.7 (a). This panel sequence involves an erotic and fetish-oriented dream in which Dreiberg, dressed in his daily clothes, encounters The Twilight Lady, an old nemesis who had sent him a picture of herself several years prior and is alluded to having been attracted to Night Owl. As Dreiberg approaches Twilight, they unclothe each other and embrace. However, during the embrace they proceed to tear their flesh from their bodies, like ripping paper from a wrapped present, revealing Dreiberg in his Night Owl costume and Twilight as Laurie Juspeczyk in her Silk Spectre costume. At this point, the pair embraces and begins to kiss as a nuclear explosion occurs in the background, turning Dreiberg and Juspeczyk into a pair of embracing, shadowed skeletons. During an actual sex scene that occurs at the end of issue seven, shown in Figure 5.7 (b), this same dense panel sequence layout is repeated. Then, in the final page of issue eleven, shown in Figure 5.7 (c), in which the nuclear-like blast occurs in New York City, again the same panel layout resurfaces. There are many other examples of specific panel sequences that occur throughout *Watchmen*, such as the use of mirrored panel layouts in issue 5, *Fearful Symmetry*, that create a large two-page spread of Veidt defeating a supposed assassin in the exact middle of the issue.

(a) (b) (c)

Figure 5.7 Pages from *Watchmen*, issues seven and eleven. From issue seven, pages (a) 16 and (b) 22. From issue eleven, page (c) 26

Another way panels can affect the reading of content is by splitting the content of a single panel into multiple panels, as McCloud demonstrates on page 97 of *Understanding Comics*. This example shows how a reader is given more clear direction in their reading and is

also given a sense of moving through the scene rather than being a static voyeur from afar. This technique also gives increased clarity in terms of time, creating a distinction between events that are occurring in sequence and events that are occurring simultaneously. The example on page 97 demonstrates that, although a reader would likely just read the voice-balloons in the panels from left to right, the general presence of each of these elements in the panel gives the impression that each of these conversations are occurring simultaneously. By breaking them apart into separate panels, the reader is forced into a specific reading in which these conversations are not occurring exactly at the same time, but instead in close proximity of each other. *Watchmen* uses this technique in this exact manner in several specific instances involving Drieberg and Juspeczyk (such as the events discussed in issue seven) and in a slightly modified form at other points. For instance, instead of using a single panel that is cut into multiple panels, Moore and Gibbons would often cut panels with the same-background or foreground into three panels and have objects or characters moving over or below the back/foreground to create a sense of movement in the scene, an example shown in Figure 5.8.

Figure 5.8 Panels 5-7 from *Watchmen*, issue ten, page 18

Now, beyond just panels, though, we also have in-panel captions and speech balloons. *Watchmen* uses captions and speech balloons in very specific manners, employing several of the techniques discussed in the previous section. There are no thought balloons used in *Watchmen*, only normal speech balloons, which was a major contrasting point for *Watchmen* since other comics still regularly employed thought balloons at the time. Second, only two

characters have stylized speech balloons; Dr. Manhattan's have a blue background with a white border and Rorschach's have a scribbled edge.

Captions have specific properties and are used in novel ways that add extra depth to *Watchmen*. One property is the fact that the majority of captions that appear are writings taken from one of three primary sources within the fictional world of *Watchmen*. The three primary sources are Rorschach's diary (Figure 5.9 (a)), Dr. Malcolm Long's research notes (Figure 5.9 (b)), or the storyline of the in-story comic book *The Black Freighter* (Figure 5.9 (c)). In these cases, the captions are stylized in some way to distinguish them from captions that contain real-time speech that is usually spoken by an out-of-panel character, having it act as or like a voice-over for the scene or panel, in other portions. Rorschach's diary entries have a torn edge and the entries from *The Black Freighter* have rolled edges like parchment. The entries from Dr. Malcolm Long's notes are simple white boxes with a black border that is not distinguishable from captions that contain real-time speech. However, these captions only appear in panels in which the doctor has his notes with him, such as during an interview with Rorschach or while he is working on them at home. The reasoning behind this might be the fact that much of the captions are quoted speech from Rorschach that narrates several scenes, such as Rorschach explaining his origin, and also provide added exposition, both of which are likely recorded in Long's notes. They may be also actual speech occurring in real-time but, in either case, the function of the text remains the same –narration and exposition. So, leaving these captions un-stylized maintains consistency with other captions in the story that present text that may be occurring in real-time.

(a) (b) (c)

Figure 5.9 Caption examples from *Watchmen*. (a) Rorscach's Diary as captions, (b) Dr. Malcolm Long's Notes as captions, and (c) *The Black Freighter* as captions

As already stated, the captions for real-time speech are un-stylized and the speech they contain are quotes. The only exceptions to this are those from Dr. Manhattan, which are stylized to match his speech bubbles—blue background with a white border. It should be noted, though, that the majority of Dr. Manhattan's captions involve unspoken, diary-like, stream-of-consciousness narration and exposition on his past/present/future, such as in issue four: "It's October, 1985, I'm on Mars. It's July, 1959. I'm in New Jersey at the Palisades Amusement Park." (Moore, issue 4, page 1, panel 6) The one time that Manhattan's captions involve real-time speech occurs in the last two pages of issue nine. The content of these captions has quotation marks and there are also separate captions with another characters speech present in the same panels.

So, these choices with how to present captions help readers in several ways. Obviously there is the clear separation of narration and speech and the added clarity of the source for these instances of narration and speech. Less obviously, though, is the different perspective of time that *Watchmen* creates, which is not easily achieved in other media: the simultaneous, or "quantum", nature of time that is experienced by Dr. Manhattan. What I mean by this is that we see several narratives occurring throughout the whole of the story in the present with various instances of flashbacks while also having various narrating voices providing a perspective that is recorded after-the-fact and not in the present. For instance, we see Rorschach moving through the city in various panels while excerpts from his diary provide narration. Obviously, Rorschach is not writing in these panels, the writing occurs outside the realm of the narrative. This instance creates a key question for a reader: Is Rorschach a reliable narrator and how accurate is the content within his panels? Examples like this give another reason why Dr. Malcolm Long's captions go unstylized since we see him writing in his notes as he hears events from Rorschach.

The final major piece of the visual grammar of comics, elements like common icons and symbols to communicate "universal" ideas, are not employed in *Watchmen*. *Watchmen*, instead,

uses less explicit visual cues than “universal” icons and relies on recurring images to provide added direction or significance to scenes, such as the repeated black outline of two embracing bodies that appears throughout the story (initially as a graffiti image, midway through in Dreiberg’s dream about Laurie, and frequently near the end during the explosion in New York and shortly after during the last sex scene between Dreiberg and Laurie, and finally the mask of Rorschach) . In any case, a reader can see how all of these various structural elements that occur with the visual grammar of *Watchmen* affect the content that is contained (and the reader's participation and interaction with that content) within them. So, how can we use this knowledge of a comic books visual grammar to better understand the 'interface' of digital media? In several examples of DataWorks there will be several parallel elements common within visually oriented media, but before proceeding into that area it is necessary to discuss the role of interactivity for Users.

5.3 The Economic Interactions of Memetics

The spread of Data online is often described as viral in nature due to the exponential spread of Data between Users; one User shares Data with multiple Users, these Users then share that same Data with other Users, and so on until a mass of Users are aware of a particular item of Data. This viral aspect has led too much of the Data shared online to be labeled as "memes."

What are memes? In 1976, the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins published his groundbreaking work *The Selfish Gene* that examined evolution from a digitalist perspective in which the role of agency in biology was given the blueprints of life, genes. In this work, Dawkins also applied Darwinian evolutionary theory to the development and dissemination of cultural information, thus also posing a digitalist perspective on culture. In its discussion of cultural information, *The Selfish Gene* presented the neologism meme to readers. The term meme is taken from the Greek word mimesis (imitation or reproduction) and the biology term gene (the replicators that contain an organisms DNA or biologic information). This combination of words

equates a meme to being an information replicator. As information, memes are described as any idea, behavior, practice, etc. that can be *shared* with others; they are ultimately the items that make up culture. As a replicator, memes are described as acting like genes; they spread by being imitated by others and persist in culture through acts of *mutation*. The term meme is, therefore, meant to describe any information that is replicated on a mass scale and then mutated based on one or more criteria. So, anything in the world can potentially become memes, but only some do. The argument that Dawkins proposes means that items that take on a memetic nature are the building blocks of culture and larger systems, such as language or ideologies.

The relation of memes to DataWorks is fairly clear since memes are a synthesis of biological studies and information theory that is meant to describe the dissemination of cultural information and DataWorks, being a product that results from various online social practices like sharing, matches up with the meme theory well. However, there are issues with the meme theory and also the virus analogy. For example, arguments have been made from the field of semiotics that the meme is a repackaging of the concept of the sign, more specifically that memes offer a process for the spread of signs; memes, Deacons argues, are vehicles or (to use a term from semiotics) representamens—*representations*—of signs. There are also various theories within memetics itself that look beyond just the viral nature of memes and also examine the "parasitic" side, which adds a certain political element and more active agency and purpose to the meme itself in terms of its dissemination.[23] These issues, along with the manner in which User communities evaluate and distribute DataWorks, have led me to an interesting intersection

[23] A parasitic nature suggests a dependence on a host body for survival. Also, parasites have a negative or positive impact on their host bodies. Memes that are parasitic, then, are those that become ingrained into the individual bodies exposed to them and have a profound effect on the host, such as an artist adopting a particular style of painting or a person subscribing to a particular ideology. These parasitic memes are more self-contained to particular communities and generally do not spread in as rapid a manner as viral memes.

of ideas that have culminated to describing memetics as a social economic process for the spread of DataWorks by Users.

What exactly is the economy of memetics? Baudrillard may have answered this question during his radical analysis of Marxism and consumerism in *For a Critique of the Polticial Economy of the Sign*. The argument of Baudrillard is that an economy should be analyzed from the perspective of consumption and want and/or inutility rather than purely production and need and/or utility. In today's age this does not seem very radical since we have companies like Nike that describe themselves as a shoe marketer rather than a shoe manufacturer. Nike sells the ideas and symbols—*signs*—that personify an idealized form of athleticism and the achievement of victory in hopes that consumers will want to be associated with these ideals and achievements by using their products or, in other instances, simply think of Nike as a cool or hip brand worth wearing by emphasizing style and attitude; i.e. the "Just Do It" ad-campaign and slogan. Economies, for Baudrillard, are therefore more about class systems that are expressed through objects that transition between (or, at times, simultaneously occupy several of) four states of value: Use Value, Exchange Value, Symbolic Exchange Value, and Sign Value.

Use Value is based on the functional logic of an object in terms of its practical application; objects as instruments. Exchange Value is based on the economic logic of objects in terms of the equivalent exchange between objects; objects as commodities. Symbolic Exchange Value and Sign Value are both based on the relationship of objects to other objects, objects to consumers, and consumers to other consumers. Symbolic Exchange Value is described as operating under "a logic of... ambivalence" and a "logic of the gift" (Baudrillard, Critique 66) in which special objects that represent a value outside of use or commodity bring together individual consumers through socially constructed contracts; this is akin to Marcel Mauss's conception of gift exchange resulting in reciprocal exchanges due to the bond that a gift generates between individuals—a gift is never free— and thus creates friction or tension

between individuals. In contrast, Sign Value operates on “a logic of… difference” and “a logic of status” (Baudrillard, Critique 66) in which objects act as signifiers that distinguish consumers apart from each other based on what others lack, ultimately placing a larger value on the fashionable or superficial qualities of an object rather than their value as an instrument, commodity, or symbol. For example, a wedding ring has great Symbolic Exchange Value for the two married individuals—the two parts of the closed system—because it represents the permanence of that relationship. However, the Sign Value may be insignificant due to the qualities that are appreciated within different social situations or circles. For example, many individuals perceive the wearing of a wedding ring as signifying that such an individual is off limits for certain social interactions, such as flirting or sexual advances, although others may view the ring as merely an obstacle to overcome for sexual advances to occur; in both instances the wedding ring is involved in negating a value: the sexual availability of an individual (the symbolic value of the ring is acknowledged) or the valuation of a person’s commitment to a lifelong relationship (the symbolic value of the ring is not acknowledged).

The significance of Baudrillard’s object value system is apparent in digital cultures when examining the various criteria that results in the replication of memes online. These criteria range from the Darwinian to the rhetorical, such as survival, subjective association, and sensory responses. In digital cultures, the survival aspect is pretty much non-existent, at least not in any literal way, but the subjective association and sensory response aspects are still persistent. So, what do these terms, subjective associations and sensory response, mean and what do they represent in terms of Baudrillard’s object value system? In the simplest terms, subjective association involves connecting the value of an object to an external set of criteria while sensory response involves an individual’s physical or mental reaction, whether it is positive or negative, to an object. What is meant by object is anything, whether tangible or not, that a person can be engaged with, including information.

Subjective association is akin to the Symbolic Exchange and Sign Value. It is like Symbolic Exchange Value in the sense that an object can represent a wide range of things on an individual level, such as items that denote personal milestones. It is also like Sign Value in that these same objects that have a Symbolic Exchange Value are connected to a broader social structure that determines valuations on fluctuating criteria. A good example of this would be the case of an individual's first car keys. On a symbolic level, the keys denote maturation and freedom, while, on the level of the sign, the keys denote an individual's social status and conventions based on the type of car the keys operate: Is the car used or new? Is it a sports car or something more utilitarian like a van? Is the car a 'green' vehicle or a 'gas-guzzler'? Other aspects of subjective associations relate to actual figures within a society and the roles that they play within the social order. In other words, subjective associations for Users can also be related to how they view their actions in relation to key figures: are they going with the trends set or working against them or doing neither? Examples of this are prominent positions of influence, such as state leaders (kings, queens, ministers, etc.) that craft laws and proposals that shape societies social order. Other examples of influential positions are those that are merely noteworthy (such as celebrities, trend-setters, critics, etc.) that create more organic and dialogic social conventions by setting an example for others to follow, such as the adoption of a particular style; hence the use of celebrities in marketing campaigns to create a sense of luxury. When someone falls into one of these positions they become infused with various symbolic and sign valuations and also transformed into objects to be consumed and processed—they are no longer just people but also information, much like a User's Avatar.

Unlike subjective associations, sensory response is a much more personal and individual experience, though a wide range of people can share the same or similar responses. In terms of a larger valuation, sensory response is akin to Baudrillard's functional value in the sense that many of the objects that will be discussed have, at their core, some basic purposes that are mostly related to how a User responds to them. Example are the absurdist humor

present within the content of the items to be discussed in the sections of “Grammary and Economy of Data”: they serve initially to just entertain and engage a User on a purely emotional level, any positive or negative valuation of that purpose is based purely on a User’s sensory response.

From these two forms of content evaluation a schematic for the different modes of engagement that occurs with digital information can be formed. This schematic involves having Users consider what they find engaging and disengaging about the structures and content of a DataWork. A User can engage with the DataWork further by entering a more Critic-oriented mode to consider what elements they think other Users would find engaging/disengaging about the same structures and content. These engaging/disengaging elements create points of entry and exit within content and are akin to the Containers that comprise the interface of a DataWork. However, instead of being larger, overarching structures that go across a wide range of DataWorks, they are instead particularized structures that are much more dependent on an individual User’s response. A simple, and possibly the simplest, schematic is to consider these different points as either active (engaging) or passive (disengaging) and then to further examine the valuation of these points by determining to what degree a valuation is based on subjective associations or sensory response. From these different valuations we can consider how particular and conventional meanings are created by Users and their communities in their interactions with DataWorks, and use that information, to approximate the motivation for why some content is Ripped and why some is not, essentially answering the question of what leads to a meme and what does not. Furthermore, it can also be applied to Users in terms of evaluating the influence of a single or group of Users in terms of the dissemination of DataWorks. The following section will provide a more specific examination and example of these ideas as they relate to User Avatars.

5.3.1 The Economics of Facebook: You Have 0 Friends

At the February 2004 Technology Entertainment and Design (TED) conference, a talk titled "What Consumers Want" was given by Joseph Pine, a business consultant known for his work on consumer customization at IBM in the 90's. During this talk, Pine gave a summary of the ideas in a recent book he had completed, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*, which details the changes the American economy has gone through with a focus on the consumer. The thesis of Pine's work is essentially that America has transitioned through four states, listed in Table 51.

Table 5.1 Joseph Pine's description of the goals of economic models

Economic Model	Economic Output	Business Imperative	Consumer Sensibility
Experience	Experiences	Render	Authenticity
Service	Services	Improve	Quality
Industrial	Goods	Control	Costs
Agrarian	Commodities	Supply	Availability

The economy began as an agrarian economy based on extracted commodities. Over time, the economy transformed into an industrial economy based on manufactured goods that used commodities as their raw materials. In the last fifty or so years, these manufactured goods became increasingly commoditized, divorcing consumers from manufacturers and emphasizing lower prices as the main selling point. To remedy the "problem" of the commoditization of goods, a new market opened based on the delivery of the consumer customization of commoditized goods, transforming the economy from an industrial to a service-based economy. But, like goods, the process of commoditization eventually overtakes services as well. At this point is where Pine suggests the fourth, and then emergent but (I would argue) now realized, economic state in which services undergo a process of customization to stage a sense of an authentic experience: the experience based economy in which consumer *perception* is king. For the remainder of his argument, Pine focuses on real-world spaces designed specifically to create a particular experience, with obvious examples like Disney Land/World and Las Vegas. But, Pine also cites less obvious choices like Starbucks Coffee, which he argues aims to give

middle- and suburban-America a sense of coffee-house culture by providing a stage with a particular décor and atmosphere. The idea of experience as an economy is most readily associated with Sign and Symbolic Exchange Value, as these are based on the interactions and relations between objects and consumers in creating perceptions of value. As a result, authenticity—though based on perception—gains more of an Exchange Value role by becoming commoditized through deliberate manufacture. The point of authenticity in experience was the underlying subtext in *You Have 0 Friends*, a 2010 episode of South Park that skewered social networking sites, specifically Facebook, for the de-sensitized and disconnected nature of relationships that it creates, specifically the idea of adding friends.

In the episode, characters treated friends on Facebook as commodities with particular valuations, even going so far as to have a “Mad Money” parody (hosted by Eric Cartman) within the episode that discussed the best people to add to a User's friend list; this point is very interesting since Miller (DJ Spooky) has remarked that "... in an information economy... information creates identity as a scarce resource." (37) One of the main characters on the show, Kyle Broflovski, demonstrates the phenomenon of Users-as-a-commodity. Kyle found that even though he had friends in the real world, on Facebook he was unpopular because he added a User with zero friends; the user had no value in the realm of Facebook and therefore this lack of value became associated with Kyle as a result of their “friendship” on Facebook. The character that had no friends on Facebook was equally as lonely in the real world and treated Kyle, his one Facebook friend, and their interactions on Facebook as authentic experiences. Kyle was an “actual” friend to the boy, which caused the boy to announce his new friendship to his parents; the parents think that their son has made an “actual” friend and do not know he is just a friend on Facebook. The boy, so happy to have a friend, even goes so far as to take his laptop (with Kyle's Facebook profile page loaded) to a movie. The major turn of the episode involved another main *South Park* character, Stan Marsh. Stan’s friends pressured him to create a Facebook profile, which he had been resistant to throughout the beginning of the

episode because the site had sucked everyone else into it. Stan did not enjoy being forced into Facebook and, having grown tired of the constant stream of information that spilled into the real world from Facebook—questions about why he had not responded to a request by his father or inquiries of infidelity by his girlfriend—attempted to delete his user profile. Unfortunately, Facebook would not allow the profile deletion, as Stan's profile had become the largest in the whole network with almost a million friends, and transported the young boy into a *Tron*-inspired version of Facebook.[24,25] As the episode reached its conclusion, Stan's Facebook Profile makes a poignant remark: "Who is stronger, the user or the profile?" This same line could be rephrased to ask: Who is more real, the User or the Avatar? This question is one of authenticity—or the perception of authenticity. Ultimately, a sense of authentic interaction is what drives Facebook and the creators of the social network understand this quality of their site. Facebook has changed drastically over the years since its inception in 2004 to create a sense of meaningful connection. The underlying means to achieve this involve the sharing of content over Facebook and increasing the user base to a point that sharing plays a significant role in a User's interactions on the site.

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[24] *Tron* is a 1982 science-fiction movie produced by Walt Disney Productions that stars Jeff Bridges as a software engineer that is digitized by an artificial intelligence program and transported into a virtual video-game world. The virtual world of *Tron* is populated by programs and users in costumes covered in neon lights that look like circuit board grids. In the case of South Park, the world is populated by FaceBook profiles that are dressed like the programs from *Tron*.

[25] Facebook's profile deletion process is actually not too far from the parody presented in *You Have 0 Friends*. There is no immediate way to permanently delete a profile on Facbook and the page to begin the deletion process is not made immediately available to a user in any of the account setting pages. What is shown to users in account settings is an option to deactivate the account shown, but this does not delete the profile and simply hides your profile from other users. To find the page to delete your profile you must either use Facebook's search feature or look through help center pages to find a link to the deletion page. However, even if you get to this page, it does not immediately delete a user's profile and instead deactivates it for two weeks and then deletes the profile. If the user logs into Facebook at anytime during this two week period, the deletion will be cancelled and the profile made fully available again.

The reason for these various exit barriers is pretty straightforward: The information on a User's profile is Facebook's currency, both in terms of actual and political capital, in the real world.

From the beginning, Facebook emphasized making contact with people and the sharing of personal information by providing a means to communicate with other users through individual messages or pages for groups of users or status updates. As development of Facebook progressed, it expanded by creating several applications for further sharing: Photo Albums, Notes, and Events. Photo Albums gave Users a way to easily share images, Notes acted as a walled-garden blog platform, and Events let people organize parties. Each of these additions increased the sites sense of socialization and allowed it to become an easy way to maintain contact with people. Overtime, the platform became increasingly more sophisticated, implementing better ways to share links to content outside of Facebook, as well as adding real-time chat, mobile-phone integration, and implementing a platform for third-parties to create their own applications (such as games), and a near real-time News Feed of user updates (which has been recently updated with an instantly updated News Ticker for what friends are doing). Each of these additions gives a User an increasing quantity of interactions on the site and, in turn, additional interactions with other Users. These additions increase the level of engagement that users have with Facebook by constantly providing new entry points to interact with other users and their personal data. The increase in entry points is also further refined on Facebook through the addition of filters that allow certain content or user to be removed from the News Feed, allowing user to designate what they find disengaging and, thus, limiting exit points for the data they interact with. The deluge of interactions, as noted previously in section 4.1 “Simulacrum and Users”, makes these interactions *appear* to be revealing a User’s actual personality, creating a sense of an authentic experience.

Now, although Facebook had, by the time of implementing these features, increased their user base to huge numbers, there was one problem: the User had to be logged into Facebook. Why is having to be logged in an issue? Well, consider how Facebook began. Originally, Facebook was a tightly closed walled garden that was only open to Harvard University students and, shortly after its inception, other Ivy League schools. As of today, the

site has become more of a partially open walled garden and is open to anyone who wishes to make a profile. However, even though Facebook expanded their user base exponentially, a User's activities are still limited to only when they are on the site or use links (which, when originally implemented, usually opened a pop-up window) to share items on Facebook, such as the 'share' buttons that appear on many different blogs. Facebook, though, ideally wants to know all of a User's interactions to further increase their knowledge of a User and what that User wants; they want to refine the entry points for a user so they will always want to engage with the network.

To remedy this issue and expand the reach of Facebook, they implemented a feature called Facebook Connect, which gives users the ability to login to Connect-enabled sites using their Facebook profile credentials. This feature is a two-fold strategy. First, it makes logging into sites simple by turning the registration process on a web site into several clicks, rather than requiring the User to fill out a whole form and create another persona (or increase the burden of attempting to maintain a singular persona). Secondly, this feature makes Facebook an easily adoptable solution to online identity and maintains Facebook as the central source for a User's profile and personal information—it makes Facebook the main Avatar of choice for a User. There have been similar attempts at online identity management, such as OpenID, but they have not been successful due to poor adoption rates.

To further the applications of Facebook Connect, they implanted a feature that gives increased interaction between a website and Facebook called the Open Graph Protocol. Open Graph gives any site the ability to be a Facebook Page that can be 'Liked' by users by adding a few specific tags to a pages coding. When a user goes to a page that uses the Open Graph Protocol and 'Like' the site, it is added to their Facebook profile under the 'Likes and Interests' section, making any of the users interactions on that site shared on Facebook. Why are these changes and the strategy behind them important? They are important because they aim to centralize the social web aspect of the Internet and give Facebook an advantage in terms of the

collection and dissemination of social information and information is a commodity. Such actions shift the channels of a memetic economy and decrease the chance for a viral nature to occur.

This factor is important since, in a memetic economy, imitation is king and goes beyond flattery to being one means of increasing a work's cultural value. Ultimately, a memetic economy becomes one of remediation, in which acts of sharing, copying, and remixing of DataWorks act as a form of appreciation for the original DataWork Producer. These acts of appreciation add a degree of political capital to the Producer and a cultural value to their DataWork, which further extends to the political power possess by the other roles of Users. Critics decree what DataWorks should be appreciated and what should be reviled. ReMixers display what they appreciate and what has influenced them based on the various pieces of DataWorks that appear within their re-mixed productions. Lastly, Consumers give impetus to productions and criticism by sharing particular DataWorks and demonstrating what is and what is not being appreciated by the masses.

The core to creating this cultural value is the ability for DataWork to take on a viral nature and spread to as many Users as possible through sharing. But, when the channels and entry points that allow the distribution of remediated works are dictated by immediate social connections, "Friends" in the case of Facebook, there is a barrier that must be overcome; the once individually perceived entry and exit points of a DataWork become actualized for all Users through these channels. As a result, much like the episode of *South Park*, the act of "friending" becomes a means of building social and political capital within the network by providing Users with many "friends" an audience that is engaged with their online activities. To illustrate this point, consider the results of "Influence and Passivity in Social Media," a recent study performed by HP's Social Computing Lab on the influence and passivity of Users on Twitter, a micro-blogging platform. The study found that many users did not re-share (retweet in Twitter terms) information from Users they followed and that most Users need to be persuaded to retweet. As a result, there are few hops that occur for tweets, meaning they have very minimal influence or

spread. Now, you may wonder why I bring up Twitter when talking about Facebook. The reason is simple: HP's methodology for their study can't be performed on Facebook because the majority of Users set their profiles as private. In contrast, the majority of Twitter User's share their tweets with the public, allowing for all Users to participate in non-linear, distributed conversations.

If a platform that is, for the most part, open to the public on the web shows very little re-sharing, how much occurs on a walled garden platform? There is no way to know, and I consider that an issue, as this ultimately means is that what can take on a memetic nature is the constantly engaged Avatar of a User rather than DataWorks.

CHAPTER 6

THE GRAMMAR AND ECONOMY OF DATA

The previous sections demonstrated two things. One was the dissection of the visual elements of comics into a grammar that parallels a visual interface. The other was an examination of the mechanisms for commoditization of information that occur on a social network; these mechanisms were revealed to be able to act as either a proponent or opponent to the formation of a memetic economy by creating an atmosphere of “authentic” and constant engagement. In this portion, the application of the principles from these previous sections will be applied to DataWork compositions to examine how they employ visual and memetic interfaces and the effect this has on the development of particular online or virtual communities.

DataWorks have various interface elements that are dependent on their type/genre and the modalities and media involved in each work. In this section I'm going to go over three specific types or genres of DataWorks: Image Macros, Music Mashups, and Digital Mashups. Each of these genres employ multiple and specific modalities to create a particular effect. Image Macros use images and text, either of which may be ‘sampled’ or re-used from other works, to create a collage of different ideas or concepts. Music Mashups join multiple musical samples together with (at times) original audio production to re-interpret and re-contextualize the chosen samples through the use of juxtaposition. Digital Mashups employ a whole range of modalities—images, video, text, and/or audio—from different media, such as re-using photos and screenshots and drawn/painted pictures in the case of images or music and sound bites and samples in the case of audio, to create a highly-plastic and fluid collage or space. Furthermore, during the examination of particular examples, I will also explore the memetic economy that is created as a result of the underlying motivations or intentions for these different Data types.

6.1 Image Macros

An Image Macro is an image with a super-imposed string of text. The text used will be composed in one of the following ways: use a patterned format, use an existing string of text (such as a phrase, cliché, or idiom), or follow a particular style (such as the use of a particular dialect of speech). The image may consist of a single, unmodified or modified media (a photo, a painting, a screen capture, etc.) or be composed of several juxtaposed media, which may be unmodified or modified. The term originates from image-sharing boards that appeared on internet forums and is specifically attributed to SomethingAwful.com (SA). The word 'macro' refers to the use of short-hand text sequences that execute a single (or series of patterned) pre-defined commands within a program, in this case the web forum software. For example, the use of macros like :lol: would insert a small, animated image of a laughing yellow smiley-face into a forum post on most of these internet forums. Since the images shared on these forums follow a pattern, Users felt the term Image Macro was appropriate.

Now, although the superimposing of text onto images has been occurring since the early days of the internet, the idea of the Image Macro is somewhat more complex and their creation on the forums at SA are related to a tradition of sharing User-altered images, which are generally referred to as Photoshops (named after the popular Adobe image editing software). Sharing altered images became so popular that a weekly Photoshop contest was held (and is still held) on the Friday of each week—Photoshop Phriday—where users (who refer to themselves as Goons on SA) alter or create images to fit a specific theme, usually with a humorous effect. In this community, and communities like it, image macros gained an Exchange Value by providing a source of entertainment and the stage for increased User interactions and engagement. In certain cases, Photoshops will take on a memetic effect, such as the case with the "All Your Base Are Belong To Us" (All Your Base or AYB) Photoshops. AYB Photoshops consist of altering images so that it appears to actually include the phrase "All Your Base Are Belong To Us," which is taken from the poorly translated opening sequence of the Sega

Megadrive game *Zero Wing*, shown in Figure 6.1 (a). Although the popularization of the *Zero Wing* opening began as early as the mid 90's on different game related websites forums (most of which are no longer in operation or now under new names), the mass creation of AYB Photoshops did not begin until 2000, reaching the peak of their popularity around 2002.[26] Over the time span of its popularity, the AYB Photoshops shifted from attempts at creating a photo-realistic image, such as with the AYB Photoshop of Wheel of Fortune in Figure 6.1 (b), to less complex compositions, as Users began to simply insert the phrase over any image (whether they were photos or screen shots or some other modality), rather than altering the appearance of images. Essentially, the idea of the Image Macro comes from a tradition of altering images to fit a specific set of criteria.

(a) (b)

Figure 6.1 The "All Your Base" meme. A (a) screenshot from *Zero Wing*'s opening and an (b) "All Your Base Are Belong To Us" Photoshop

Before proceeding further, though, I shall examine a similar phenomenon that matches and pre-dates AYB and other photoshopped images: street artist poster/graffiti campaigns like Obey Giant. I am bringing the Obey Giant campaign into the conversation for several reasons. One, it demonstrates a real world, analog counterpart to Image Macros. Two, it began out of a mostly random act. Three, though its origin is mostly random, it is a contemporary phenomenon with clearly defined intentions. Four, it has very rigid structures to the construction of the images

[26] Examples of some defunct sites that featured *Zero Wing* include *Zany Video Game Quotes*, which can be found on the Web.Archive.org, and the *Rage Games* forums (now known as the *Classic Gaming powered by IGN*).

involved. And, finally, it is an image that has undergone quite a bit of remixing by random people.

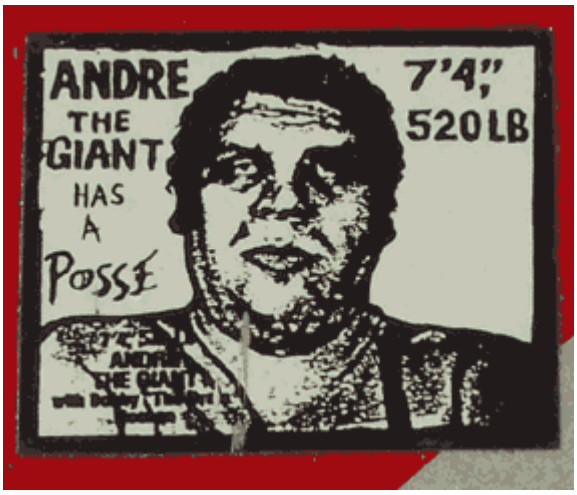


Figure 6.2 The original Andre the Giant Sticker

So, what is Obey Giant? Obey Giant, or simply Obey, began as a vinyl sticker made by artist Shepard Fairey (at the time, a student at the Rhode Island School of Design) from a photo of the wrestler Andre the Giant taken from a newspaper clipping. Fairey has described the creation of the sticker as being an accident --he was simply showing a friend how to create stencils for silk screening and chose the image randomly from a newspaper ad. The sticker consisted of a black and white image of Andre the Giant with the phrase “Andre the Giant has a Posse” to the left of the image and the phrase “7’2” 520LB” on its right. Fairey, amused by the image and “[wanting] to elevate Andre out of...wrestling subculture” and make him on par with “more mainstream cultural icons,”(Lemons) proceeded to post the stickers all over Providence, Rhode Island, and eventually many other cities in the United States. The sticker campaign was not just a random act, though, as Fairey composed a manifesto in 1990 describe the campaign and its intent:

> The OBEY sticker campaign can be explained as an experiment in Phenomenology. Heidegger describes Phenomenology as “the process of letting things manifest themselves.” Phenomenology attempts to enable people

to see clearly something that is right before their eyes but obscured; things that are so taken for granted that they are muted by abstract observation.

The FIRST AIM OF PHENOMENOLOGY is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment. The OBEY sticker attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker and their relationship with their surroundings. Because people are not used to seeing advertisements or propaganda for which the product or motive is not obvious, frequent and novel encounters with the sticker provoke thought and possible frustration, nevertheless revitalizing the viewer's perception and attention to detail. The sticker has no meaning but exists only to cause people to react, to contemplate and search for meaning in the sticker. Because OBEY has no actual meaning, the various reactions and interpretations of those who view it reflect their personality and the nature of their sensibilities.

Many people who are familiar with the sticker find the image itself amusing, recognizing it as nonsensical, and are able to derive straightforward visual pleasure without burdening themselves with an explanation. The PARANOID OR CONSERVATIVE VIEWER however may be confused by the sticker's persistent presence and condemn it as an underground cult with subversive intentions. Many stickers have been peeled down by people who were annoyed by them, considering them an eye sore and an act of petty vandalism, which is ironic considering the number of commercial graphic images everyone in American society is assaulted with daily.

Another phenomenon the sticker has brought to light is the trendy and CONSPICUOUSLY CONSUMPTIVE nature of many members of society. For those who have been surrounded by the sticker, its familiarity and cultural resonance is comforting and owning a sticker provides a souvenir or keepsake,

> a memento. People have often demanded the sticker merely because they have seen it everywhere and possessing a sticker provides a sense of belonging. The Giant sticker seems mostly to be embraced by those who are (or at least want to seem to be) rebellious. Even though these people may not know the meaning of the sticker, they enjoy its slightly disruptive underground quality and wish to contribute to the furthering of its humorous and absurd presence which seems to somehow be antiestablishment/societal convention. Giant stickers are both embraced and rejected, the reason behind which, upon examination reflects the psyche of the viewer. Whether the reaction be positive or negative, the stickers existence is worthy as long as it causes people to consider the details and meanings of their surroundings. In the name of fun and observation. (Fairey)

Whether Fairey's campaign is successful in all the goals of his manifesto is hard to determine, but it is clear that the campaign did awaken some wonder in many people since, by the early 90's, people had begun creating and posting copies of the sticker in cities all over the US and, eventually, the world; here, the sense of wonder provided by the Obey campaign acts as an entry point to engage a public audience. At the same time, others began modifying the image into their own parody versions of the sticker, replacing Andre the Giant with images of different people while following the same basic format, in some cases with humorous or parody constructs. Examples of such parodies are the use of the *Fantasy Island* television show character Tattoo, in such instances of parody an active public becomes engaged by the ability to enter a "conversation" with the original Obey campaign. By the mid 90's, though, Fairey was faced with legal action for his use of Andre the Giant's image, spurring Fairey to create a new image for his campaign. The new image featured a Big Brother-esque illustration of an extreme close-up of Andre the Giant's face framed in a black border with one of two words placed below the image: 'OBEY' or 'GIANT'. This new image, which has become an iconic staple of street art,

is still posted and spray-painted all over the world and has gained enough traction to appear in a variety of media outlets, such as popular television shows, movies, and music videos. A random image transforming into a viral campaign and being perpetuated and remixed by unknown agents, this is all rather familiar on the Internet. Now, back to discussion of actual Image Macros.

A popular example of Image Macros that emerged during the same period as AYB Photoshops is the lolCats meme. If you are familiar with lolCats you may not think they have a very distinct structure or intentions (or any thought put into them at all) behind their creation, and to a degree you would be correct in that assumption. Where that assumption falls short though is related to the origin of lolCats, which is linked to several other items that have created some basic underlying elements and intentions. The lolCats image that most people are familiar with and that brought the meme to a global-scale audience, "I Can Has Cheezburger?", was spawned from a series of other images and memes that appeared earlier in several online communities (the cat in this image is actually directly from one of these communities). These communities, which include the already mentioned SA and 4chan, had (and still have) a wide range of memes that they originated and maintained through the acts of sharing and modifying content; as noted earlier, sharing of content has an Exchange Value in these communities. One early meme attributed to the forums at SA is the Image Macro "I Am In Your Base Killing Your D00ds," which involves that phrase super-imposed over an image; the original image used was a screenshot from an online match from the Real-Time Strategy (RTS) game *StarCraft* (or possibly *Command and Conquer: Red Alert 2*, another RTS) in which one player, going unnoticed, destroys much of his opponents base and proceeds to send the message "I am in your base killing your d00ds."[27] This meme followed a basic structure that involved the use of a phrase that stated, "I am in your <u>LOCATION</u>, <u>VERB-ing</u> your <u>NOUN</u>" with a related image,

[27] The meme archive and wiki site, KnowYourMeme.com, attributes the origin of this meme to a User named 1337h4x that posted an image from *StarCraft* on the SA forums in 2003.

which together demonstrate that a person has already been bested in a competitive situation and they do not even realize it; it is a slightly complicated and stylized way of telling someone that they have already lost. These associations with a game enjoyed by a the community gives the phrase an increased Symbolic Exchange Value that engages the users on a level beyond the mere exchange of humorous “commodities.” Additionally, the text used has further variations in quality of grammar and spelling, such as using "I'm in ur" in place of "I am in your." As other communities began using this particular Image Macro the variety of images used expanded exponentially.

Figure 6.3 HappyCat as a lolCat

From this Image Macro that originated on SA, we go to 4chan specifically, which has a community (the /b/ forum) with a predilection for cats (among other topics and things that range from the humorous to offensive) that led to the Caturday meme, which began as a weekly posting of Image Macros of cats on Saturdays (this eventually expanded to *all* days) on the /b/ forum; again, an instance of Symbolic Value. Some of these images were modified Image Macros, such as "I am in your base killing your doods" and its variants, or become memes or Image Macros in their own right. The creator of "I can has cheezburger?" followed the premise of having an image of a cat (in this case the image is of “HappyCat”, an image found by SA User on a Russian cat food website) with a text string and the intentionally poor grammar and

spelling present in several images, like those following the "I am in your base" Image Macro.[28] So, in the case of lolCat images, the structures are essentially just the use of specified type of text (poorly written statements) with a specific type of image (a cat), though this has expanded into the use of all kinds of animal images (lolDogs, lolRuses and so on); the content that can be encoded into lolCats has expanded to such a degree that it might be more accurate to refer to them as simply lolAnimals. The integration of other types of structures in the form of comic book speech and thought bubbles for text has also occurred, which can add an extra dimension to the Image Macro. So, in the case of lolCat images, the structures are essentially just the use of specified type of text (poorly written statements) with a specific type of image (a cat), though this has expanded into the use of all kinds of animal images (lolDogs, lolRuses and so on); the content that can be encoded into lolCats has expanded to such a degree that it might be more accurate to refer to them as simply lolAnimals. The integration of other types of structures in the form of comic book speech and thought bubbles for text has also occurred, which can add an extra dimension to the Image Macro.

So, we have the structures, but what of the intentions behind lolCats and other lolAnimals? What do Users find so engaging about these Image Macros? Well, because the creation of PhotoShops is a part of the culture of these communities, the propagation of increasingly new images helps sustain these communities; if no one participates and actively adds content to the community, the community (or at least this particular aspect and its related components) dies. The original, underlying intention behind lolCats then is not to communicate any particular message but an act of simply participating and giving. But, what about lolCats as they exist now, why have they become a meme on a global scale? What are Users Ripping from lolCats and why? The main thing being Ripped from lolCats is the use of animal imagery

[28] YTMND and KnowYourMeme.com attribute the 2003 posting of “HappyCat” to SA forums to a User that goes by the same name (although the name FancyCat has also been used). The Russian pet food site is still in operation at HappyCat.ru, but you will need to go to Web.Archive.Org to view the original site.

and humor. The likely reason for the use of animal imagery, especially ‘cute’ images, is that they evoke a sentimental emotional response in many people; this relates to Caturday, which some Users have joked that it exists because cats were as soulless as the /b/ forum. This type of emotional (and highly Symbolic) response is likely linked to larger cultural practices and artifacts: owning and domestication of certain animals as pets (dogs, cats, etc.), the use or appearance of animals in various narratives (mythologies involving animal gods and totems, stories from an animals perspective like *The Call of the Wild*, Disney’s many films featuring talking animals, etc.), and the use of animals in entertainment and education (the circus, animal theme parks like Sea World, zoos, etc.). So, on one level we have examples throughout the history of humanity showing appreciation of animals in some form and this aspect thrives within the imagery of lolAnimals. Secondly, there is the experience of humor and the need people feel for such an experience. Since these images are so easy to create, share, and replicate they provide a convenient and always accessible form of humor for many people that enjoy seeing animals “saying” and “doing” silly things.

Another popular Image Macro is the Motivational Poster, or simply Motivationals. Motivationals have a consistent structure that is similar to comics: a large main graphic, a black background or frame, a title text in a large font, and a caption. The popularity of the format is likely the result of the parody Motivationals that Despair Inc. began printing in the late 1990’s. Dubbed Demotivationals, Despair Inc.’s posters have a cynical and sarcastic tone that mocks the overly optimistic and positive messages of actual Motivational Posters, as shown in Figure 28 with their Demotivational for Ambition: a salmon is about to be eaten by a bear with the caption “The Journey of A Thousand Miles Sometimes Ends Very, Very Badly.” The Demotivational modifies the Lao-Tzu quote “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” and flips the meaning into something much darker and pessimistic. The combination of the dark humor used by Despair Inc. and the simplicity of the Motivationals structures gives a wide

range of Users a template that they can quickly and easily fill, allowing them to create their own versions by modifying already existing content or creating content from scratch.

(a) (b)

Figure 6.4 A Despair Inc. (a) Demotivational and a (b) deconstruction of said Demotivational.

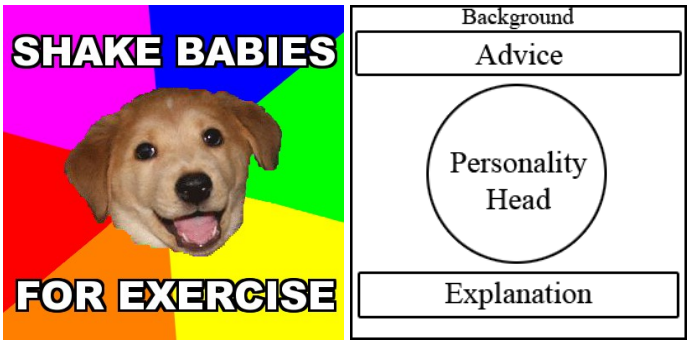
Of course, as the Motivational gained popularity, the types of content used expanded quite a bit. On the SA forums, the Motivational was at first used to create sardonic quips on various ideas and themes but eventually shifted to include different tones that covered a range of emotions and modes of thought or style; the data of the Motivationals is encoded in different emotional ‘formats’. The Motivationals that are posted today can be about almost anything you can imagine, though many still maintain a title and caption with a negative and/or sarcastic tone. Exceptions to this style of voice for the title and caption usually involve an absurdly positive voice making a comment on a subject that isn't entirely appropriate or has some inherent offensive qualities, such as having a hyper-masculine or chauvinistic title/caption combo like 'BREASTS / THEY'RE AWESOME.' Other exceptions involve a more neutral voice that makes a comment on an image that is absurd or a commonly understood theme within a particular online community, such as community slang terms or a subject matter that is familiar to the community. In these instances, the neutral voice can be either ironically mocking the subject matter or embracing it. In relation to these more neutral-voiced Motivationals are those that take a series tone and clearly embrace the theme or idea they are depicting. So, what are the intentions behind these Image Macros?

Figure 6.5 A Motivational using a comic book cove

Much like lolCats, Motivationals are a part of a community and their propagation is a key aspect of that community and they also provide a readily available source of humor to be enjoyed (the Exchange Value). Beyond that, though, is the ability to use Motivationals --and other types of Image Macros-- as a means of saying things that a User may not necessarily be able to themselves, such as things that are inappropriate. Take the 'BREASTS / THEY'RE AWESOME' example. Normally, a person would only be able to make such a statement in certain contexts, such as just with a closer group of friends or associates that would not find the statement offensive. As an Image Macro though, it acts as a proxy or 'mask' or 'character' that is making the statement, making it something that the User is *not* saying directly. In these instances, the Motivational has more of a role in terms of Sign Value by created a detached voice that exists outside the social hierarchy of a group or community.

A slightly more recent Image Macro is the Advice Dog meme, shown in Figure 30, which has led to a diverse set of offshoots (referred to as Advice Animals from here on) consisting of a variety of animals and non-animal "personalities" to convey a humorous point.Similar to the Motivational, Advice Animals consist of four main structural elements: a kaleidoscope-like background consisting of two or more colors (higher-resolution images sometimes enhance this with a detailed starburst), a piece of bad advice, an explanation/punch line, and an image of an animal's face that has been cropped from another image or a whole

animal (sometimes the face of a person or non-animal character is used). Advice Animals are mostly relegated to specific internet communities and have not become as ubiquitous as lolCats or Motivationals but the popularity of the format within these communities is likely the result of the shared qualities that other Image Macros have: the simplicity of the structures involved and the ability to easily replicate them.



(a) (b)

Figure 6.6 An (a) Advice Dog Image Macro and (b) a deconstruction of Advice Animals

The various sub-memes that follow this same structure have a change in the personality or intent of the 'advice' given, like the different voices/encodings of Motivationals and creatures of lolAnimals. For example, there is the Advice Animal image macro known as 'Courage Wolf,' shown in Figure 6.7. This Image Macro follows the Advice Animal format but instead of just giving advice (in this case the advice consists of hyper-masculine and chauvinistic statements that can vary in range from the highly negative and inappropriate to sarcastically positive), but also give absurdly masculine motivational statements that are not necessarily inappropriate. Examples include statements like: "THE DOCTOR SAID IT WAS CANCER / I CALL IT A CHALLENGE". The lack of seriousness when discussing cancer may be offensive to some, but the overall confidence expressed in the statement is an example of a hyper-masculine bravado that is funny in its absurdity, and possibly even inspiring for some persons. On this level, CourageWolf operates on the Symbolic level by providing a reference point to masculinity and power, which some Users find engaging.

Figure 6.7 A CourageWolf Image Macro

In some other cases, albeit less common, Courage Wolf gives appropriate advice, although almost always in a condescending and disrespectful tone —the voice of Courage Wolf is a sort of arrogant alpha male, so it only appropriate that his statements are condescending to Users. The handful of instances that Users have not maintained the condescending tone in their Courage Wolf Image Macros involves the use of a quotation or an absurd take on generally accepted tropes (such as having a “Carpe Diem” sentiment), such as a popular declaration made by an anime character from the series *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann*, Kamina, an alpha male type with a huge ego and masculine bravado. In certain communities, like 4chan, anime characters like Kamina have a great Symbolic Value to due to their popularity, giving the characters personality traits added value within the community. Kamina makes the statement to the main protagonist, Simon, to inspire him before battle: “Don’t believe in yourself! Believe in me, who believes in you!” This quote also appears at different portions in the series in modified forms, thus giving the quote more inspirational weight for Users familiar with the anime series. The final utterance of the quote is made by Kamina before a classic heroic act (self-sacrifice for the greater good) and is a declaration of passing on the torch to Simon in hopes that he will be the one to lead Team Gurren in their quest to save humanity: “Listen up Simon and don't forget! Believe in you, not in the me who believes in you; not in the you that believes in me. You should believe... believe in yourself!” AdviceAnimals, in this instance, combine the different parts of

lolCats and Motivationals into a single package: animal imagery, comedy, and ‘characters’ to speak through.

You see then that, as a whole, Image Macros demonstrate that structures can be found in even simple forms and create complexity through their constant usage and involve a Ripping method that focuses mostly on maintaining the structural elements, the Containers, which are tightly linked to the content displayed, and the content that is Ripped by Users generally maintain the *intentions* and voice—the encoding—of said content. Because the type of content, the inappropriate humor in several of the examples used, is shared and replicated so often, it is not too far-fetched to assume the content is highly engaging to the Users within these communities and suggests that these communities, as a whole, have a personality, which is constantly being reinforced by the activity of their respective User bases.

6.2 Mashups

The term Mashup was originally used to describe two types of musical products: 1. A remix that involved the blending of specific elements from two or more songs from distant genres and/or time periods, such as the vocals of a hip-hop song combined with the music of a pop song; 2. Songs composed from cutting up precise samples from multiple songs from different genres and periods to produce a new work. More recently, the term has been used to describe derivative works that are composed in large part, or entirely, of pre-existing content (referred to in this text as Digital Mashups). In these types of Mashups, an incongruity and clash between the content employed is implied and usually expected, especially when they can involve a variety different pre-existing media (text, images, audio, and video) items. Before getting into the latter definition, Music Mashups will be explored first.

6.2.1 Music Mashups

In the early days of hip-hop music a common practice performed by DJ's involved the isolation of particular rhythm sections in songs that had no vocals (described by DJ's as the break in a song) and would create a loop of this section of audio through the use of two-

turntables and two copies of a record to; this loop is known as a break beat.[29] Early examples of break beats include the Sugar Hill Gang's 1979 song *Rapper's Delight* which uses the break from Chic's *Good Times*, though this instance does not involve a DJ using turntables and instead uses a pre-recorded tape cut together in a studio or a live-band playing the desired song sections. Early Turntablists, like Grandmaster Flash, would expand on this method by using three turn-tables with a mixer and several records from different artists to create a song that involved a mix of different break beats with original methods to create sounds from records (like record scratching) and partial sections of vocals, such as with the studio recording of Grandmaster Flash's 1981 song *Adventures of Grandmaster Flash On the Wheels of Steel*, which used eight different songs.

These examples demonstrate the creativity of early hip-hop artists but they also displayed the limitations of the equipment used. For example, the rapping and vocal sections used in *Wheels of Steel* still have the musical and background audio elements present in the sampled songs, so the mixing between the different songs was not always seamless. Also, the number of turntables used by the DJ limits the number of different audio sections that can occur simultaneously at any given time. In the case of *Wheels*, even though Flash was using three turntables he could, for the most part, only play two different audio sections at once since two of the turntables are used to create and loop a break beat from one song and the third turntable is

[29] The term break beat has several other definitions based on the social use of various musical movements. Some of these definitions are based on a particular aesthetic –syncopation and polyrhythmic structures— that appeared in popular samples used to create break beats, like the "Amen Break." Others have used the term more colloquially to refer to the portion of the song that sounds good, making it ideal to be used by a DJ, such as the case with this OldSchoolScholar.com description:

> The match that was lit creating Hip Hop Music was called the breakdown or break beat. It is the funkiest part of a record. It is the section that jammed the best from a song that rocked the massive wild. It is the sweet spot Kool Herc tapped time and again by dropping the needle on it keeping the B-Boys dancing. Song after song the climatic beat of the breakdown was the emphasis hyping up the people into celebration. (Ball)

In the aesthetic description of a break beat, it would be the heavy, rhythmic portion of a song that engages and elicits listeners to dance.

used to integrate a second songs vocals or to mix into the next song. The few instances in *Wheels* that have more than two different audio sections playing involved very precise timing and quick movement by Flash and usually required scratching on the third record to replace the break beat; these factors are likely why these instances lasted for only short periods.

Many of these limitations were overcome with the proliferation of the sampler and synthesizer-sampler hybrids among hip-hop artists since they allowed for many breaks to be stored in the hardware's ROM or another media, like floppy disks. Early examples of the use of samplers are the works of the electro group Afrika Bambaataa & the Soulsonic Force, like the 1982 song *Planet Rock* which has a melody created from a sample of the Kraftwerk song *Trans-Europe Express*. By the end of the 80's, the use of sampled break beats was quite common among hip-hop artists and would drive the sound of several different genres besides just hip-hop, most notably electronic dance music genres like jungle and drum-and-bass that would sample from hip-hop artists; a good example of this is the "Amen Break," which is a drum break from The Winstons' song *Amen, Brother*, that has been sampled in thousands of songs.

At this same time, there were artists that were using samples in an unusual way. The JAMS, for instance, had songs composed of samples from a wide range of artists as they rapped, talked, or beatboxed over the music. For example, their 1987 song *All You Need is Love* features The Beatles, MC5, Samantha Fox, and Hall and Oates and many other artists. The JAMS perform little to no mixing on the samples, instead cutting them together in a rough fashion, juxtaposed against each other as they play over a beat created by a drum machine; the drum machines may even be creating beats from samples as well.

In the early to mid-90's, several artists in various electronic dance music scenes would begin to deconstruct several popular break beats samples. One of the most popular is the "Amen Break" that was used by N.W.A. on their 1988 song *Straight Out of Compton*. Electronic DJ's sampled the "Amen Break" from N.W.A.'s *Compton*, thus beginning the mass proliferation of the sample throughout dance clubs. These early examples used samples in a conventional

manner: create a break beat by looping the sample. By the mid 90's, artists in the UK rave scene would experiment with the "Amen Break" by deconstructing and cutting each drum hit (snares, hi-hats, bass drum, crash symbols) from the "Amen Break" into individual and separate samples, thus allowing for whole new rhythm sequences to be created by re-arranging these samples in novel ways; this method is now a common practice among music producers to create realistic sounding drum beats for a songs rhythm section.[30]

Now, each of these elements—sampling, deconstructing samples, and crossing genres—would become the basis of contemporary music Mashups. A good example of a contemporary Mashup artist is GirlTalk. GirlTalk uses hundreds of samples from a wide range of artists that come from many genres and time periods to compose his song tracks and album mixes while incorporating little to no "original" music production. For example, on GirlTalk's album *Feed the Animals*, track seven, *Like This*, features thirty-one samples (several of which feature samples from other songs), including Beyoncé's *Get Me Bodied*, LL Cool J's *Mama Said Knock You Out*, The Bangles' *Walk Like an Egyptian*, Rick Astley's *Never Gonna Give You Up*, Nine Inch Nails' *Down in It*, Gwen Stefani's *Serious*, Yo La Tengo's *Autumn Sweater,* The Carpenters' *Superstar*, Metallica's *One*, and Diana Ross's *Upside Down*. R&B, Hip-hop, Pop, Industrial, Dance, Indie Rock, Soft-Rock, Metal, Disco, and even more songs created by artists from the 70's to the present are all cut-up and mixed together into this single song.

Now, I do not want to focus too much on the content just yet but on the way GirlTalk and other Mashup artists treat songs. Instead of focusing on traditional musical structures like melody and harmony, pitch and sound dynamics, Mashup artists focus on larger elements that

[30] In his installation piece *Can I Get an Amen?*, Nate Harrison provides a detailed history of the "Amen Break." In his history, he also provides analysis of the social impact of the "Amen Break" amongst different dance cultures and, in the latter half of the work, heavy analysis of the copyright issues related to the popular usage of the break by DJ's, marketing agencies, and record companies (with no relation to the original creators of the Amen Break) that distribute albums featuring isolated samples of breakbeats. In his history, Harrison notes the significance of N.W.A.'s usage of the "Amen Break" in *Straight Out of Compton* and cites the work of DJ and bass-guitar player Tom Jenkinson, better known as Squarepusher, as an example of an artist who has highly deconstructed the "Amen Break".

are comprised of these traditional structures and treat them mostly as rhythmic sounds that can compose break beats that are accompanied by sampled vocals. So whereas DJ's in the 90's might take apart and separate a sampled drum break into its individual drum hits to create new rhythms, an artist like GirlTalk will take several distinct breaks, beats, vocalizations, singing, and other elements within several songs and combine them together to create more than just rhythmic sections. For example, the first forty-one seconds of track one of *Feed the Animals* (*Play Your Part, Pt. 1*) is composed of several distinct portions from four songs that have been manipulated and cut-together: 1. The very beginning of the opening drum-break of *Pretty Woman* is looped; 2. The bass-groove from *Gimme Some Lovin'* immediately accompanies the drum-break from *Pretty Woman*; 3. A drum hit (or possibly an electronically generated sound) from TTC's *J'ai Pas Sommeil* accompanies the previous two items shortly after approximately the three second mark; 4. The organ from *Gimme Some Lovin'* is eventually heard and played shortly over the break beat created from the previous three items at the fifteen second mark and is re-used briefly at another instance later on; 5. The distinctive vocal "Hey!" from *Gimme Some Lovin'* is used at the twenty-eight second mark and repeated several times at other portions of the song; 6. The end of the first verse and whole of the second verse of the vocal track from UGK and Outkast's *International Player's Anthem* appears throughout this whole forty-one seconds.

GirlTalk's Mashups treat sampled songs as having two main super-structures: vocal sample tracks and music sample tracks. These structures have a stronger association with the technical aspects of music production (track and album mastering) and not the actual creative process of making songs; though that is not to say that the use of multiple recording tracks cannot be a part of the creative process. In either case, these individual tracks are composed of several more precise parts. Vocal samples consist of one or more of the following: 1. Distinct singing, which can consist of choruses and harmonies; 2. Rapping or spoken word; 3. Vocalizations that are neither singing or rapping, such as distinct yells, screams, beat-boxing or

other sounds. Music samples are more complicated but are treated in a similar fashion and divided up mostly into one of the following: 1. Shorter, individual instrumental melodies, tunes, rhythms, and/or breaks; 2. Longer, multi-instrumental tunes, rhythms, and/or breaks. What is meant by this is that a Mashup artist may isolate sounds in the same fashion as DJ's in the 90's (deconstructing whole rhythm or vocal sections into their individual parts) and also the fashion of DJ's in the 80's (isolating the groups of instruments hat form a break in a song that can be used for a break beat).

What this view of music does is allow an artist like GirlTalk to treat the individual groups of elements and structures in songs in an unconventional way rather than focusing on traditional compositional structures like individual notes, such as how GirlTalk uses certain vocal samples as rhythmic structures. For example, the "Hey!" from *Gimme Some Lovin'* used in *Play Your Part, pt 1* is treated like a rhythmic element—a beat—and used to accent several different break beat patterns that occur in the first two minutes of the track, such as at the end of the organ samples and during the transition into the second movement of the song that uses a different hip-hop vocal track and break beat. Another example is an extremely short sample of Huey Lewis singing the line "Beat" or "Beating" on *The Heart of Rock & Roll* that is repeated over a dozen times for six seconds, creating a rapid-fire sound that is closer to synthesized percussion than an actual vocal. There are many more such occurrences throughout the whole of the album and other works of GirlTalk.

Another earlier example of Mashups is *Q-Unit*, an album created by The Silence Xperiment that was composed of samples from three albums: Queen's *Greatest Hits* and 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* and *The Massacre*. A song from the album, *This Is How We Bite The Dust*, uses a break beat composed from a sample of the bass-line of Queen's *Another One Bites the Dust* with a modified sample of the claps and bass-drum hits from The Game and 50 Cent's *How We Do*. The piano melody from the start of *Another One Bites the Dust* is also used at a few marks, mostly layered behind the main break or at the start/end of a break or lyrical

verse. The hip-hop vocals from 50 Cent are used primarily and are accompanied by two specific vocal samples from Freddy Mercury appearing in the background ("And another one…" and "Hey-ey-ey.."). Unlike GirlTalk, The Silence Xperiment did not go to the extremes of sample deconstruction and used fewer samples to create a blend of just two artists rather than going across a whole array of artists/genres/periods.

Other Mashup artists do not necessarily even go to the lengths of The Silence Xperiment. Rather than making compositions from overly-deconstructed samples, most DJ's in dance clubs will use only use a few samples to create a Mashup, such as combining the vocal track of a pop or rock song with the music track(s) of a hip-hop or dance song (or vice versa). These types of Mashups are closer to early hip-hop, using a break beat created from one songs music with the vocals provided by another song, creating a more-seamless remix and mix between songs that is akin to Grandmaster Flash's *Wheels of Steel*.

Now, what sort of interface arises from this? Since the term interface generally describes visual interactions it is somewhat difficult to create an immediate, piece-for-piece equivalence of an aural interface with the visual grammar discussed earlier. The distinction with the Mashups discussed thus far is the way these different musical structures interact with each other when cut up by DJ's and the manner in which a listening User interprets the changes and remixing done by said DJ's. Genres of music that are generally not associated with dancing (especially dancing in clubs) like grunge, metal, and industrial become incorporated into a rhythmic sound that follows the convention of dance music or, to put it more crudely, these genres of music become re-contextualized so they are *danceable*. Furthermore, the basis for the chosen songs that are Ripped and used in a Mashup continues this re-contextualization beyond just the interface and into the realm of Metadata.

The process or reasoning behind the chosen Ripped content (and the intentions of such Ripping) used in Mashups is complex, even when viewed from a schematic of engagement/disengagement based on sensory response or particular criteria (such as working

only with specific genres/sub-genres). The reason for this is that the juxtaposition of the various samples used in Mashups can create such a radical re-contextualization of the samples that the intent of the User(s) (who is/are engaging with the content on several levels) who created the Mashup is indiscernible beyond very basic generalities. For example, some Mashups appear to be created as a sort of joke that can be danced to. Some examples of this are humorously titled Mashups, such as DJ Magnet's Mashup "Brick Dick," which samples the main rhythm sections of The Commodores "Brick House" and the hyperbolically boastful rapped lyrics of Mickey Avalon's "My Dick" and uses two other samples (one from the Beastie Boys and another from Jimi Hendrix). The accompanying music video that DJ Magnet created to share his Mashup on YouTube uses scenes from *Boogie Nights* (a film about a well-endowed porn star based on the life of John Holmes) and footage of The Commodores and Mickey Avalon. A similar titling convention is employed by The Silent Xperminent for the Q-Unit Mashups: "Candy Shop" + "Fat Bottom Girls" = "Candy Bottom Girls." To add further humor, the album art for Q-Unit features 50 Cent's face PhotoShopped together with Freddy Mercury's mustache. In these cases, the titles of the Mashups and their accompanying media implies that the samples chosen were based more on the title, the Metadata, of the original tracks rather than the compatibility between the musical content of the selected tracks. This is not too surprising, as a User may be capable of manipulating Ripped samples to such a degree that most any songs can go together, GirlTalk being a prime example of this.

GirlTalk, in a similar but contrasting manner to DJ Magnet and The Silent Xperiment, appears to choose his samples based on both the Metadata and the musical content of a song. For example, *Play Your Part (Pt.1)*, the first track of *Feed the Animals*, appears to follow a general theme for the samples used. The beginning section of the Mashup, approximately from the start to approximately the one minute mark, features mainly three songs that are sampled heavily: a drum sample from Roy Orbison's classic, lonely, and longing-for-intimacy *Pretty Woman*; an organ, bass-line, and short vocal sample from the high-energy, rock-and-roll

Spencer Davis Group song *Gimme Some Lovin'*; the rap lyrics from UKG and Outkast's arrogant "player" attitude oriented *International Players Anthem*. Each of these songs are essentially about sex, but sex in different contexts: The lyrics of *Pretty Woman* have a romantic, narrative quality—a man making a chance encounter with a beautiful woman that he desperately wants; *Gimme Some Lovin'* fits into the genre conventions of early rock-and-roll by using thinly veiled metaphors for sex (in this case, getting a woman to dance and join in a heated party acts as the metaphor); *International Player's Anthem* is blatant and blunt about sex, speaking of women as untrustworthy objects while giving basic guidelines and 'ideals' for other 'players' to follow. Sex as love, sex as recreation, sex as conquest: each of these contexts clash against each other, asking the User to evaluate the similarities and differences of the songs content and Metadata. Questions and thoughts that come to my mind immediately are: Roy Orbison is not really singing about love but sex disguised as love. Do the rappers of UKG really see themselves as "players" or are they just lonely men who use the player personae to hide their insecurities? Maybe the *Spencer Davis Group* is really just talking about connecting with people in social contexts and not using a metaphor at all. Or maybe re-contextualization is just something conjured in the mind of a User and they should just listen, enjoy, and *dance*. The possibilities are many.

Re-contextualization and (again) humor allows music from the past to get a new life from misuse, exposing people to music that they might never hear in diverse and different ways, rather than allows such music to waste away in disuse. Again, an act of sustaining something, in this case musical works, appears. What might this demonstrate? Possibly that the intentions behind Music Mashups are both about the expansion of horizons—the connections between diverse types of music—and also about participation by exposing Users to material that challenges their assumptions about music. Or maybe they are just about dancing.

6.2.2 Digital Mashups

Digital Mashups are a whole other beast from Music Mashups, but they share many similar qualities. First off, as already mentioned, Digital Mashups are composed almost entirely of pre-existing digital content that may either be remixed together or juxtaposed. Some sources, though, will use the term Mashup in a very loose fashion and apply it to practices that are common on the Internet, such as the re-use of textual and graphic elements on the web (such as reposting news stories) and then placing additional commentary about this particular story (the basis for most blogs). Fan made music videos are also sometimes cited as a form of a Mashup since it uses a blend pre-existing audio content with cut-up, pre-existing video content. I disagree with automatically considering such items to be Digital Mashups since the term is meant to imply a combining of generally non-complimentary items.

How is commentary non-complimentary to a news story? I suppose if the tone of the commentary is drastically different it can create a sense of a Mashup but if that's the case then media and news satire, like *The Daily Show*, could be considered a Mashup. And in regards to fan music videos, there is the possibility for incongruity between the content used, but more often than not the content will be complimentary in style or tone to create a more synthesized work. For example, even when the original content sampled in fan videos comes from different cultures, such as with anime music videos that take edited footage from Japanese anime and combine it with popular songs from other countries, the sampled content can match up with each other due to the tone and genre of the samples. However, in cases where the editing shifts the tone of a video dramatically by placing emphasis on different elements, such as an anime music video focusing on moments of humor or romance that occur in an action oriented anime series, to create a sense that the content used is complimentary is very much in line with the style of Music Mashups. So, there is some difficulty with what is considered a Digital Mashup but I think it would be best, in these instances, to use the term Remix to describe these uses of pre-existing content since all Mashups are a Remix, but not all Remixes are a Mashup.

In either, we'll focus on what is an obvious Mashup. The popular Mashup site, You're The Man Now Dog (YTMND), involves the juxtaposition of several elements: super-imposed zooming text, a still or animated image that is tiled in the background, and a looped audio file. As this format gained popularity, the use of non-tiled backgrounds and animated images has become popular, though most still maintain the use of a tiled background. Also, the absence of super-imposed text occurs with many YTMND Mashups.

Figure 6.8 A screenshot of the original YTMND.com page

The first YTMND Mashup was created by Max Goldberg and appeared in the year 2000 at http://www.yourethemannowdog.com/ and featured a tiled image of Sean Connery in the background with the text "YOURE THE MAN NOW DOG" super-imposed. The audio for the page was this same line being repeated by Sean Connery; the line was from a movie that Sean Connery was starring in that year, *Finding Forrester*. Following this, other Internet users that weren't affiliated with Goldberg replicated this same format using different images and audio. Early examples of YTMND's include a tiled image of William Shatner as Captain Kirk shouting the name "Kahn" (the super-imposed text is "KHAAAN!!") from the movie *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. In these instances, the audio, text, and image have a clear link, however other YTMND's do not necessarily have inherently clear links or require a user to be already acquainted with the content of other YTMND's. In the instances where the links between each element are not clear a re-contextualization of the content occurs, which is similar to the way the samples used in Music Mashups interact and can change the perspective of the listener.

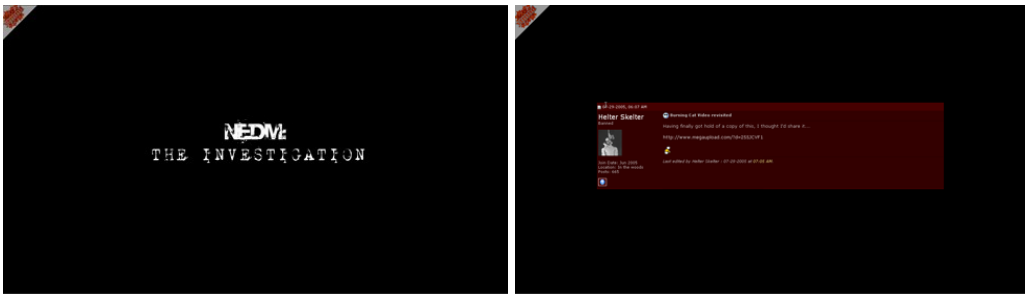
So, how do the structures involved in an YTMND Mashup change the way different media elements interact? Consider the original YTMND page. The image of Sean Connery that

is used, according to the 2004 YTMND.com site profile for the original page, is from the 1999 Cannes Film Festival and was found using Google Image Search. There is no explanation given by Goldberg for his image choice, although likely reasons for it being chosen are the pointed finger and partially opened mouth that make Connery appear to be addressing the User viewing the page. The text that is super-imposed on the page is in all caps with a zooming-effect applied to it, giving a sense of the text moving towards the User. The combination of the zoomed text with Connery's pose in the tiled image changes the direction of the audio that is looped in the background. What this means is that the original context of the audio loop has Connery speaking to another character in the film, but the new context of the YTMND page has the audio directed towards the user viewing the page instead. Is this a very notable change? Not really, but it is a small change that is, nonetheless, noticeable.

Less absurd YTMND pages will employ animated slideshows with audio cues rather than just having several items juxtaposed. These types of YTMND's have a linear structure and a clear explanation. Examples are the YTMND "NEDM: The Investigation" which explains the origin of a particular fad on YTMND known as "NEDM" (an acronym that stands for "Not Even Doom Music") and the reason it has changed.[31] In this YTMND the slideshow consists of black images with white text that use a rough-edged sans-serif font that provide a narrative voice. Other images used in the slideshow include screenshots from several web sites: Internet forum posts from the shock image site and forum at Ogrish.com, upload sites like PhotoBucket, and YTMND site-profile page threads. The opening audio is from the soundtrack of the movie *Fight Club* and is not looped. The song from *Fight Club* eventually transitions into Coburn's dance song *We Interrupt This Program (Jean Claude Ades Remix)*; it is at this point that the images involving YTMND are inserted into the slide show. The end of the YTMND features a graphic that parodies the YTMND logo, replacing the letters YTMND with NEDM, and the words "The

[31] The term fad on YTMND is used to describe an intertextual and hypertextual link between different Mashups on the site itself. Fads are essentially memes within the site and can involve the use of similar images, audio, titles, and other elements.

End” before the slideshow repeats itself. The concluding remarks of the slideshow explain the intent behind the “NEDM” fad, since many users did not fully grasp the original intent of the acronym and associated it with actions that were indirectly related; this is not particularly relevant to the rest of the discussion but a brief explanation of how “NEDM” began and evolved is in the Notes section.(krytycal)(Goldberg, You're The Man Now Dog!)[32]



(a) (b)

Figure 6.9 Two (a) (b) screenshots from "NEDM: The Investigation"

In either case, the interaction between these different structures is pretty straightforward. The first song in the YTMND has a very dark quality, using break-beat styled drums with droning and high-pitched ambient synthesizer sounds. These qualities give the black and white images used in the first half of the slideshow in the YTMND a very hardboiled or noir

[32] The phrase “NEDM” on YTMND originated from a video that was posted on Ogrish.com. The video showed a cat being burned alive by a teenage boy. The video went viral and was reposted on a wide range of forums either in video form or as still-images extracted from the video. In most all cases, moderators on these different sites, including YTMND, quickly deleted the videos and images posted. On YTMND specifically, a user by the name “titanium-gecko” was extremely offended by the content and proceeded to down-vote any YTMND’s made by users that gave up-votes to sites depicting the cat being burned. In one case, a down-voted user named “Spotz” explained that he had up-voted an YTMND featuring an image of the cat because the audio track was music from the game Doom. Titanium-gecko’s response to this was, "Okay Spotz. Since you do not ‘condone’ burning kitten your sites have been 3'D until further notice. Still... nothing justifies 5'ing burning kittens. *Not even Doom music*" (emphasis mine). So, some confusion occurred over what NEDM implied in different YTMND’s —Was it condoning animal cruelty? Was it mocking the titanium-gecko? Or was there something else to it? The fact is the phrase was condemning YTMND’s that used music from Doom since they were generally very poorly crafted but rated highly simply because they used Doom music. Eventually the “NEDM” fad would evolve and integrate many new elements that created even more confusion. Some of the items that would become associated with NEDM are images of unharmed cats or cats from other memes (such as HappyCat), Chapstick (the result of one of the cat images used featuring a fireman asking a cat if it would like some Chapstick), and the Coburn song *We Interrupt this Program*.

kind of quality, which is appropriate since this is an “investigation” after all. The transition to Coburn’s *We Interrupt This Program* is related to the NEDM fad itself, which became standard use in “NEDM” YTMND’s after a user named “Moheevi” used the song. Since it is a dance song, Coburn’s track gives the latter half of the slideshow a lighter tone, which is appropriate since the tone of the text in the slideshow becomes one of reconciliation by explaining the intent and origin of the phrase “NEDM” and the basic intents of the users that participate in the fad. In this specific example, the removal of the audio tracks would change a User’s interaction with the Mashup and also weaken the hyper-textual link between it and other “NEDM” Mashups on YTMND.

So, what do “NEDM: The Investigation” and the more absurd original “You’re The Man Now Dog” Mashups share in terms of method and intentions? Well, much like the previous examples in Musical Mashups and Image Macros, they involve the re-contextualization and, at times, mocking, but the Digital Mashups cited are operating in a different direction. In the case of the Music Mashups and Image Macros cited, they re-contextualize their content to mock ideas and people that exist outside of the content, whereas the YTMND pages mock the content they contain; the re-contextualization of these Mashups is based on the separation of the loudest, most absurd portions of content—the content is de-contextualized. So, in the case of the original YTMND page, it is mocking the fact that a figure like Sean Connery would say such an absurd line in one of his last film roles, and that no one thought this was silly and out of place. Sure, the line is meant to be ironic (the line is mocking the bravado of youth that is expressed in slang as the films protagonist flounders a bit while trying to write) and is part of a humorous scene in the film, but the line ends up being perceived not so much as ironic and something that the audience laughs with but, instead, as an old man awkwardly speaking like his protégé. The line, in my mind, is a situation akin to the story of *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. I imagine there were people on the set of the film assuring Connery that the line is ironic and funny and that he would not look foolish, that people would not be laughing at him but at the

joke of the scene, but then Goldberg makes his Digital Mashup and it reveals the truth: Connery, you've let yourself become a joke.

The "Investigation" Mashup operates in a similar fashion but directs its aim at the community and user-base of YTMND. Like a segment on *The Daily Show*, the "Investigation" strings together a narrative from a range of different media sources to explain a fad's origin in a bid to counter misinformation about the fad. Since the controversy of the fad is the belief users participating in the fad (or giving thumbs up to posts of the original cat video) were in support of burning cats (or just animal cruelty in general), the exact intentions of the "Investigation" are hard to pin down. The creator could feel the community is too stupid to realize most people (even the supposedly depraved user-bases of communities like YTMND, 4chan, or SA) aren't in support of harming animals and that, in many cases, users have no idea about the exact intentions or origins of a fad, making their participation simply that: participation for participations sake; which very well could also be the motivation of the "Investigation" creator. Or, possibly, the creator may have wanted to inform the community as a means of mediating the discourse of user threads. If this Mashup were a segment on *The Daily Show*, I'd say it was a combination of both (though in the case of *The Daily Show*, the discourse would be that of the news media and their audiences). But, since it is not a segment on *The Daily Show*, I'll go with Option C: The User made it for the community because s/he wanted to participate in the fad and the "Investigation" allows the User to interact with the NEDM fad in a novel way that others had not considered.

6.2.3 Avatars and Mashups

In the discussion of Mashups thus far, there are clear links to earlier discussions of User identity and persona, specifically the Avatar. Avatars are, arguably, a Mashup composed of various pieces of MetaData that can form into either an organic identity (non-and partially-persistent personae) or manufactured identity (partially-persistent and persistent personae).

What is most important when treating Avatars as a Mashup, though, is the ethos that Mashup practices and techniques imbue into the Avatar and, by extension, their communities.

The ethos of the Avatar begins with sample. Sampling created a mindset that transformed consumption into a productive and active role and, furthermore, made access to media not just a means of viewing or receiving content but as a means of User expression. For music, sampling makes listening to a song an entry point for the imagination and mind and forces Users to change their perceptions of what a song is. Rather than being insulated, singular works, sampling treats songs plastic texts consisting of modular pieces for Users to use and re-use in new works. From sampling comes the deconstruction of samples which allowed Users to transform their viewing into a logical act that focuses on structure and composition and, through the breaking down of samples into component, allow the development of unique aesthetics. Lastly, crossing genres set the final stone in place by adding a playful element that allows Users to detach samples from the cultural and genre conventions that originally produced said samples. Being active, being thoughtful, being playful, and being detached are the driving forces of the Avatar when treating it as a Mashup.

Now, what do I mean by organic and manufactured persona in relation to the Avatar-as-Mashup? To put it simply, I am talking about agency and purpose and perception. In the case of an organic persona, a User does not have a guiding vision behind their Avatar and the reason for this is it is usually a non-persistent to partially-persistent one; there is no means, or not an easily viable means, to create a single guiding vision for the Avatar. As a result, the Avatar of the User is subject to the perceptions of the community in determining the nature of a User's persona. For a community to determine the nature of a User's persona they must link together the various samples that compose a User's Avatar and deconstruct the samples to determine the single narrative thread that describes the User in question. In doing so, a community will likely ignore contradictions and, instead, generalize and distill the samples down to the parts that fit together to form a coherent image of the User's Avatar. Manufactured Avatars work from

the reverse end and involve a User taking up the role of agency by actively choosing and deconstructing the samples that compose the image of their Avatar. For a User to successfully create the image of their Avatar there must be a means to create a single guiding vision, this means is generally the existence of some level of controllable persistence for the persona.

So, Users and communities of Users must be active and think critically for Avatars to exist and have a willingness to play with their image for different personae to emerge. What is most important for these actions to occur, though, is the sense of detachment, a sense that the Avatar is a persona of the User and not the identity. Only by maintaining a sense of detachment can a User view the Avatar as a construction, a composite, as a Mashup.

CHAPTER 7

TRANSCODING

Transcoding, as explained earlier, is a process of either moving digital data to another container, re-encoding digital content within its present container, or a combination of the two (extracting data and re-encoding it into a new container). The aim of this process is to allow increased access to the digital data within the container by making it readable by a greater degree of software and hardware applications, or to do the opposite and limit the access. Since there has been little discussion of the composition of just text within this document, the focus of this section will be on how to apply the processes of DataWorks and digital media to the reading and composition of texts and the rhetorical approaches that change the encoding of a text.

So, how does moving data streams between containers work in computers? Essentially, containers have a specification of features and settings and support for a series or range of encodings based on these specifications. Therefore, to move content streams between containers requires compatibility between the containers for a majority of their specifications and support for the same (or at least a majority of the same) encoding formats. In cases where the encoding used for one container is not compatible with another container, the content will need to be re-encoded with an appropriate codec. These conditions translates the general method for transcoding into a set of repeatable processes: de-code each stream, de-multiplex (de-mux) streams into separate entities, encode the separated streams to an uncompressed third-party “neutral” format, re-encode each stream into the desired codec, re-multiplex (re-mux) each stream together according to the containers specifications. This whole process can be applied to composition when codified as follows: reading-deconstructing-[re]writing-reconstructing. From this codified perspective of transcoding, text (and the composition of texts) can be viewed digitally by treating texts as if they were DataWorks.

7.1 Text as DataWork

Now, based on the various examples of DataWorks that were examined in previous sections, there have been a myriad of methods shown for how Users take various digital media and combine them together or re-mix them to create new works. These methods will be first applied to the reading and deconstructing of texts.

The various items that were examined in the previous sections presented several underlying processes and trends in the construction of DataWorks, which consisted of the following:

1. Juxtaposition of divergent elements using a consistent theme or series of themes.
2. Sampling and the processes of Sample deconstruction and decontextualization.
3. Identification of the components and contexts of a theme, genre, or chosen Sample.
4. An emphasis on the Metadata of selected Samples, such as genre conventions or structural mechanics.
5. An emphasis on decentralized community involvement in the production and distribution of content.
6. Creation of a sense of authenticity and engagement.

The way these processes work with text are best demonstrated by writing that already follows some of these processes or bears some of these qualities. For example, the emphasis on the Metadata of Samples is a key part of the parody and satire that is produced on *The Onion*, a parody newspaper and news media site, with the recent addition of two cable-television shows adapted from the short video segments produced for the site.

7.2 Digital Reading of a Text

The Onion began as a parody newspaper and later expanded to the web and, most recently, cable television. They feature such items as fake articles and opinion pieces from

'characters' with names like Smoove B, sports editorials with titles like “Christ Returns to NBA”, ironically skewed infographics, inappropriate public opinions on current events, and a healthy skewering of politics and media agendas in articles like “Future U.S. History Students: 'It's Pretty Embarrassing How Long You Guys Took To Legalize Gay Marriage'.” So, some articles are simply humorous or absurd while others are witty satires. From this range of texts and subjects, *The Onion* has developed a distinct style and a voice that employs different characteristics based on the subject matter and context of an article, "television" program, or "radio" program. For example, on many of their public interest or recent event editorials and articles, *The Onion* writers will use many common clichés, phrases, and article constructions that news media use in their coverage of events, adding a sense of authenticity by mimicking the characterizations of news media and, thus, engaging their audience in a specific and directed way. To put it in digital terms, *The Onion* Samples the language of news. *The Onion* demonstrates their Sampling technique in a recent article, “Nation Somehow Shocked By Act of Human Nature,” which falls within the satirical category and focuses its wit on the news media’s treatment of local tragedies as national issues, specifically on the sentimental voice of such stories.

“Nation Somehow Shocked” satirizes the ‘local-tragedy-as-national-news’ articles sentimental voice by, first, not providing any specific details beyond the name of a town for the tragedy and, second, alternating between the almost-clichéd shocked reactions of citizens and a scathing realistic, editorial voice that is not shocked at all by the unnamed events. The lack of naming a specific act and the cliché Samples suggests the insincerity of the news media and the product-like nature of this genre of article and, furthermore, decontextualizes these cliché Samples and allows them to only provide vague implications of it being an act of violence. To further reinforce the thesis, the article as a whole follows a basic pattern that starts by introducing the local community and its members, to immediate events happening in the community, and then expanding into other states that share their sympathy for the town and

express shock at the event, and finally concluding with a sentiment of hope and unity; essentially, the article follows a formula. Through the article, these different sections sentimental Samples are contrasted by the juxtaposed realistic-voiced editorial remarks, which act as witty punctuation for the thesis of the article by both constantly pointing out the actually un-shocking nature of the events and the insincerity of the articles empathetic remarks. In a rhetorical sense, these realist remarks act as short, frank logical rebuttals to the emotional appeals of the Samples.

The article is presented below in whole, with each part parsed (marked up if you will), according to its relation to a digital reading of the article.[33] The frank, realist voice of the rebuttals are highlighted in red and juxtaposed with the expected sympathetic, idealist voice of the clichés highlighted in yellow. Highlighted in blue are responses from people, both male and female, between the ages of 29 to 45 in the community and in other cities and states, which in a tragedy article demonstrates that the impact of an event reaches all people—no matter age, gender, location, or class—and that they must come (and, in fact, are already coming) together to mend and heal. Marked with orange-lines on the side is the introduction, which covers the title of the article, date and issue, a vigil photograph, and the first two paragraphs of the article, all of which situate the reader to the articles genre and tone. Following this, marked with green-lines, are the beginning body sections that focus specifically on the community where the "event" occurred, moving into the second body section, marked with dark blue-lines, that begin moving the article to a wider, national scope. At the purple lines, the third body section begins, inserting non-specific exposition to the article about an investigation into the events before reaching the beginning concluding section, which is marked in light blue-lines. The beginning

[33] Mark-Up refers to a method of formatting and/or structuring of plain-text files through the use of a language that consists of "tags", generally consisting of commands placed in brackets like <> or []. Some common mark-up languages are HTML (Hyper-Text Mark-up Language), which is used to create the structures and basic formatting/styling for webpages, and XML (eXtensible Mark-up Language), which is a customizable mark-up language generally used to create semantic structures for a document or file format.

concluding section shifts the article into a very sentimental tone about healing and unity and fragile gift of life, which is quickly deflated in the closing of the article, marked in dark red-lines, that bluntly states that all of this will be forgotten within a week.

Nation Somehow Shocked By Human Nature Again

'How Could Someone Do Such A Thing?' Populace Wonders Of Event That Has Transpired Literally Millions Of Times

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Stunned mourners gather following the incident that really shouldn't have come as such a surprise to them.

BRANDON, SD—As more details emerged of Friday's horrible but relatively commonplace manifestation of human nature in Brandon, SD, citizens nationwide somehow managed to enter a state of shock, apparently struggling to comprehend an act that, throughout history, has happened thousands upon thousands of times.

In the wake of the tragedy, Americans have expressed a deep sense of bewilderment, though it is unclear why, given that events just like the one Friday have taken place frequently throughout their lifetimes.

"I still can't believe what happened," said 48-year-old Linda Durland of Atlanta, who for some reason has been unable to extrapolate from literally millions of previous examples the fact that such acts inevitably repeat themselves. "It's just unthinkable."

Despite there being nothing unusual about the incident in Brandon, the media has descended upon the small town in droves, somehow finding a way to portray the event as if it were a novel phenomenon or some sort of aberration within human society, an assertion that even a cursory glimpse at the species' violent past would immediately disprove.

"You never expect something like this to happen," said 29-year-old Brandon resident Janine Ackerman, though she would be justified in expecting something like this to happen, and then happen again and again and again, and so on, ad infinitum. "It just came out of nowhere."

At hundreds of vigils held throughout the country Saturday night, Americans came together to mourn the victims of the incident. According to reports, many collectively vowed to ensure that an episode like this never happens again, a pledge that people must rationally have no intention of keeping, as it would entail the impossible task of forever altering basic human nature.

In Brandon, the mood reportedly remained one of stunned disbelief this weekend, as residents grappled with how their community had become the scene of such tragedy, all of them presumably under the impression that their town is something other than a collection of human beings, which is all that appears to be required for such an act to occur.

"This is the last place you'd expect something like this to happen," said local grocery store owner Howard Conyers, 54, seeming to repress all knowledge that close-knit communities such as Brandon, being inhabited by people, are among the types of places where these incidents have always happened.

Added Conyers: "It just makes no sense. Brandon is such a close-knit community."

As investigators have pieced together the exact sequence of extremely familiar events, news outlets and citizens alike have been quick to categorize the act as "inhuman," though in reality the behavior is universal to all human cultures and civilizations.

"I can't imagine what goes on in the mind of that kind of person," 31-year-old Linda Starks of Natchez, MS said. "Who could possibly do something like this?"

According to law enforcement statistics, 15,000 Americans do something like this each year, and nearly all people will at least briefly think about doing it at some point during their lives.

As the initial wave of grief began to subside Sunday, many throughout the country started openly questioning why this incident happened, putting forth a host of explanations that ranged from lack of government regulation to negligent parenting to declining church attendance, but never once mentioning that it likely would have occurred anyway.

"If it's possible for something positive to come out of this terrible turn of events, perhaps it will make people stop for a moment and realize how short and precious life is," said Daniel Romero, 45, of El Paso, TX, who, until this event, seemed to have somehow ignored the most omnipresent characteristic of his species: its mortality. "You have to recognize that each day you have is a gift and always remember to cherish your loved ones."

At press time, Romero remained unaware that he, like everyone else in America, will completely forget the incident within a week and then abandon his own sensible advice.

Figure 7.1 A Marked-Up *Onion* Article

7.3 A Digital Composition Method

The reading of *The Onion* article in the previous section gives a reverse-engineering view of the writing of a satirical text and suggests a hybrid product and process writing method. It is product oriented in that the final article must match the conventions of a news article—it requires the parts of such an article—as well as the style of a news article—a detached reporting of the events—combined with the appropriate voice of the "genre" of the piece—human interest and local tragedy that conveys an appropriate pathos and sympathy towards the event. It is process oriented in how these different elements and expectations are filled and met to produce a satirical article. This hybrid approach to writing a text begins at a different place than the process method, rather than starting with pre-writing and rough-drafts to begin forming a text, it starts by considering the larger super-structure of a text and its genre to set the expectations and framework. So, instead of beginning with pre-writing that asks questions about a topic, it begins with asking questions about the medium of text itself: How does a text like this flow? Why does the text flow this way and not another way? What are the parts of the text and how do they facilitate the flow of the text? What characterizes the voice of a text like this? This part of the digital writing process is about the mechanics and understanding how they facilitate the goals of a text and is oriented towards the Metadata and Containers of text. After these elements are understood, a more traditional process method takes over, but it does not immediately focus on the generation of Content Streams but rather on how these Streams function within the Containers. So, the parsing of *The Onion* article shows how the writers constructed a framework by identifying what is expected in a tragedy article and then approaching a theme that can be used to add a satirical edge to the article. The second half of the equation, the [re]writing and reconstruction, begins with treating these different parts and mechanics of a text's genre digitally. To treat a text digital at this portion of the method involves approaching the expected style of content as Samples to be deconstructed and remixed into new and novel forms –this is how the article was also read digitally. It is at these points that the

process method becomes more evident as questions about the content itself become the focus and become drafted and revised until the creative expectations of the text are met.

Now, this is just a demonstration with a genre of text that accommodates a digital reading, but what of other texts? The traditional argumentative essay can be read digitally as well. Using the same “mark-up” method, the overall structure of an argumentative essay can be deconstructed as the Introduction, Body, and Conclusion and, in many cases, Bibliographies and Notes. The Introduction can be further deconstructed into a paragraph (or paragraphs) that consist of a Subject and Thesis. Connecting these components together are sentences composed of introductory statements, transitions, and more particularized narrative constructions or devices that are further shaped by aesthetic and rhetorical styling’s. Similarly, the Body and the Conclusion can also be deconstructed. The Body consists of paragraphs that are composed of articles, possible sub-articles, and the evidence that supports these articles. Also, there will exist, in more sophisticated arguments, instances of counter-articles and sub-counter-articles and the evidence that supports these counter-articles, all of which will be addressed (or at least should be) addressed with a statement of resolution or acknowledgement that voids the counter-article(s). Connecting these different articles will be sentences consisting of rhetorical constructs (questions, parallelisms, anecdotes, etc.), transitions, and narrative constructs that connect each paragraph together (including back to the introduction and into the conclusion). The conclusion will also consist of a paragraph (or paragraphs) that contain the implications of the argument, concluding remarks, and narrative constructions that tie all the articles together into a coherent statement (or series of statements) that connects with and reinforces the thesis of the essay’s argument.

Treating these components digitally positions the larger, super-structures (Introduction, Body, Conclusion, Bibliography, and Notes) as Containers and the Subject and Thesis as the Metadata for the Content Streams in said Containers. But what of the essay itself--is it also a Container? The essay, like other similar forms for other media modalities (film, comics, songs,

etc.), exists, like the Avatar, somewhere between Meta Data and Containers. Consider the general conventions and expectations that can be shared by a variety of genres within the form, such as the means of structuring sentences and paragraphs to convey information in both expository and argumentative essays. From the Meta Data perspective, the form is a larger genre or meta-genre, whereas from the Container perspective, the form is a part of the encoding of the Content-Streams. Neither view is incorrect, but both perspectives only cover a part of (and point towards) the whole picture. The bigger picture is that while it is true that Containers shape Content-Streams and that Meta Data shapes the interpretation of Content-Streams and their Containers, Content Streams can also affect the shape and form of their Containers by exertion of internal pressure.

Consider the *Onion* article previously discussed. I identify it as a news article but it is obviously not a news article if the news never happened—sort of a textual-equivalent of Margritte's *Pipe*. What it is, actually, is a narrative-essay making an argument—a satirical essay—but with the content of the essay paralleling and imitating a news article. This distinction is important because many of the "articles" on the *Onion* are not satirizing news; they are satirizing culture and human nature. Even the article cited, while clearly mocking news, is at its core about the existential issues of humanity, more specifically the sense of detachment between people in everyday life that is only temporarily erased (but never completely removed) during ephemeral moments of tragedy. Here, transcoding is not just about shifting between modalities but voices and expanding the limits, the "feature-set" (to speak in computer terms) if you will, of the Containers.

Thus far, the discussion has been on texts that are more or less created by individuals, or are thought of as the product of individuals, and have not addressed the role of decentralized community production and distribution of a text. Now, a text can most definitely be the product of a committee or group, and a majority of texts are the result of some degree of collaboration; think of the writer-editor relation of publishing. But, when the word decentralized is used a sense

of the absence, or de-emphasis, of authority is what comes to mind. The texts that best match this are *actual* digital works and include wiki's in which community members can freely input into the production and revision of a text.

Being decentralized does not change the overall process discussed so far, but instead democratizes and distributes the tasks to a (potentially) large group or groups of Users with varying degrees of expertise and different skills. For example, an article on a wiki may have Users, generally in the role of Producers, who are good at producing large amounts of content but may not necessarily be well versed in copy-editing or providing citations or the technicalities of a particular wiki's editing tools, mark-up language, or style guidelines. Other Users, in more of a Re-Mixer or Critic role, may be very well versed in these areas that an original Producer is deficient and improve the formatting or prose or other aspect of an article, such as the research. In this hypothetical example, the Producer understands what should constitute the Content Streams of a particular article but they are not necessarily well versed in what should constitute the Containers and Meta-Data of the article, which a Critic and Re-Mixer do know. Furthermore, the process aspect of the digital writing method becomes externalized on a wiki in the form of User discussions and, often times, arguments –the spark of many "edit wars" on the content of a wiki article.[34] These discussions offer the most significant change to the writing process by keeping a text in a constant state of flux, allowing it to be always malleable (with exceptions, such as "controversial" articles being locked from edits on a wiki) and therefore updatable.

The updatability of articles on a wiki are in instances of a subject or topic that is very popular, this aspect of the decentralized process generally results in an article (or series of articles) of increasing quality due to there being a vast amount of people with expertise on (or at least an interest in) the particular topic. But, on the other end of the spectrum, less popular topics may not get the same degree of attention or have as large a pool of experts due to there

[34] Edit Wars refers to ongoing additions and deletions to an article on a wiki, usually perpetuated by strong ideological differences over what content is appropriate for an article.

being a smaller community of Users participating on creating the article(s) for a topic. Furthermore, more “serious” topics may not get the same attention as “minor” topics. So, the decentralized process can result in a varying degree of quality for different articles on a wiki, which is one reason some wiki’s, such as Wikipedia, have adopted self-evaluation processes and status-rankings to add metadata on the quality of an article and provide a rubric of sorts on how to improve articles. Of course, what is considered good or bad, noteworthy or superfluous, and objective or bias has led to a unique rhetorical situation for media in America.

CHAPTER 8

THE NEXT BEGINNING, A CONCLUSION

8.1 A Digital Post-Ideological Rhetoric

In 1974, President Richard Nixon proposed the "Comprehensive Health Insurance Act" (CHIA), a bill aimed at healthcare reform meant to act as a Republican counter to the reforms championed by Democratic senators like Ted Kennedy. Nixon's health reform included several proposals that included a national health insurance mandate, the formation of Comprehensive Health Insurance Plans (CHIP), the expansion of affordable insurance in the form of pre-paid Health Maintenance Organizations (which, in 1973, had already been expanded with federal funding under the Health Maintenance Organization Act [HMOA]), and create multiple patient pools of federally assisted healthcare to control costs, and the expansion of Medicare and Medicaid coverage for these different pools. The whole of Nixon's proposal were aimed at maintaining both private and public healthcare sectors without entering into a single-payer system. The CHIA never entered in to law due to opposition from Democrats like Senator Kennedy that believed the bill was really just meant to be pay out to private insurance companies and not meant to actually reform healthcare. Kennedy was partially correct. There are recordings between Nixon and John Ehrlichman, a main player in re-establishing HMO's in America, that point to HMO's being a private enterprise boon and the HMOA did help HMO's become the dominant insurance option in America, and, yes, they are very profitable. Later, Kennedy would state that he regretted his decision to oppose the HMO-centric CHIA, as it would have laid a foundation to lead to the single-payer system he championed.

In 2009, President Barack Obama proposed the "Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act" (PPACA), which has several parallels with the proposals of Nixon's CHIA. These parallels include the maintenance of private and public sector healthcare systems, a national

insurance mandate, formation of patient pools, expansion of Medicaid and Medicare coverage. However, despite these parallels between Obama's healthcare reform bill and past Republican proposals, there is outrage over the bill coming from the rightwing of American politics calling it socialistic and an expansion of the welfare state. Which brings me to my point: the left-right, conservative-liberal, public-private binaries that structure political discourse in America have lost almost all meaning and are merely signifiers for superficial divisions.

Consider the response of the rightwing to any laws that are proposed by Democratic politicians, and Obama in particular, over the last several years. Laws, like the PPACA, are characterized as simultaneously "socialistic", "progressive", and "liberal"—they are all transcoded into a homogenized encoding of their meaning and definition. Each of these items is a distinct ideology with their own perspective and methods for achieving policy goals, though they do (and have) shared some of the same goals. For example, Progressives and Socialists both care about labor rights, but they care about them for different reasons and in different ways. Socialists, at least from a Marxist perspective, view industrialization and Capitalism as inherently oppressive to labor, and those laborers have a right to participate in the decisions that affect them. Progressives, in contrast, do not necessarily share a Marxist view of the forces that make up Capitalism and have a more realistic and pragmatic perspective: in the past, laborers have been exploited due to the lack of industrial and business regulations and, therefore, a central, public authority must set regulations for private industry to hinder and (ideally) end these abuses. Liberalism, at least the classical form, really doesn't share such an opinion and generally favors the power of a laissez-faire market and industry to regulate itself; this, of course, shifting in the mid-19th to early 20th century with the formation of Social-Liberal thought that is concerned with the social well-being of citizens and the promotion of civil liberties. From the Social Liberal perspective, it is believed that it better for individual rights and liberties to be expanded and protected by a central body (a view mostly linked to empiricists like Thomas Hobbes and the republicanism of Thomas Paine) and, as such, support the rights of

workers to unionize and bargain for better work conditions. So, Socialism and Progressive and Liberalism (Social Liberalism, at least), on the surface (at the Metadata level), have similarities on certain issues, but when both are examined it is clear they diverge on other issues and, in terms of actual ideology, are very different things; and Liberalism really has no business being lumped in with either ideology without some degree of specificity. Ironically, the people using these ideologies as signifiers for dividing public opinion are only concerned with the similarities that they share.

Of course, the ironies do not end there, and the rightwing is not the only group guilty of political shortsightedness. For example, the highly political and "liberal" comedian and political commentator, Bill Maher, is very critical of religion, especially in terms of its role in the formation of policy in America and the perceived negative effects it has on society. But, ironically, the idea of social justice, one of the major defining stances of contemporary "liberal" thought, originates from religious organizations. A Jesuit priest, Luigi Taparelli, coined the term social justice to describe the application of the teachings of a Catholic Saint, Thomas Aquinas, in the creation of a society based on equality and an understanding of human rights –and the use has been expanded in secular circles to emphasize these aspects. (Zaldja 1) Furthermore, there are many varied perspectives on what equates to social justice and various methodologies that, when examined, would likely construe social justice as being an individualistic endeavor achieved through "moral acts of autonomous citizens" (Zaldja 4), which is quite the opposite of how it is characterized by the right; in these instances, ideas of a "social safety net" (Zaldja 4) are rejected and the individual is responsible for themselves in a sort of moral free-market. Religion was also a key part of the 1960's civil rights movement in America, with figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X drawing strongly from religious teachings. Yet religion, in spite of the positive role that it can play (and has played) in the development of American Liberalism, is something that is automatically categorized as Conservative due to issues such as gay rights, an issue that has very vocal opponents arguing from a highly theocratic (a form of

conservatism) perspective of Americas founders and history; such a perspective being in opposition to the liberal foundations of America, making a theocratic perspective actually anti-conservative when properly examined in an American context.

But that sort of thoughtful consideration on issues and policy won't happen. Mainstream media today have hijacked the methods of different web cultures (which had, themselves, drawn from a diverse array of counter- and sub-cultures like hip-hop and graffiti artists) and applied them to their own content, turning it into Sampled streams of data—sound bites and video clips and transcript quotes—to be remixed into a desired narrative and discourse. These narratives thrive on the lack of delving into a subject and, instead, only aim to decontextualize and juxtapose these Samples until they are transcoded into single servings of rhetoric that are divorced from any meaning that doesn't maintain some right-vs-left metanarrative of American politics. The news of today is so strange that a comedian and host of a news parody show, Jon Stewart, has become the most trusted voice in news today by turning his style of parody and satire into media criticism. Why has Stewart become the most trusted voice in America? Because audiences realize the radical tactics of web- and counter-cultures are now the standard practices of media empires, so why even trust the so-called mainstream media? Because audiences realize the ideas of thriving sub-cultures are now buzzwords for the mass marketing of narratives that do not reflect the reality that people actually live in anymore. But no one really cares, because now, everyone gets to participate in the constantly remediated spectacle that is news media by going to the Wild West that is the digital world.

Welcome to the digital post-ideological rhetoric.

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