Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice

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Introduction

A common exercise in the first-year composition course is the literacy narrative—an autobiographical reflection upon the paths, interests, and practices that led the writer to the very moment of writing the narrative, focusing in particular on reading and writing as the pillars of literacy. A variation on this assignment, first introduced to me by Dickie Selfe (see Kitalong, Bridgeford, Moore, & Selfe, 2003), is the technology literacy narrative, which shifts focus from reading and writing to using and producing digital texts and the ways in which the writer has learned to use the technologies that support those digital literacies. I have chosen to begin this introduction with a version of my own technology literacy narrative, not because I believe that it is particularly unique or enlightening, but because it relates my intellectual development from writing teacher to digital rhetorician and in doing so serves the twin purposes of establishing my ethos as developer of this project and acknowledging that my approach to defining and locating “digital rhetoric” through the lenses of theory,

method, and practice are necessarily both idiosyncratic and rooted in the disciplines through which I've traveled. [1] [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=No_1;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1]

Through my reading and research, I am aware that more than one academic discipline and intellectual tradition can make claims to being the "home" of digital rhetoric, and I've worked to make sure that I don't let my own history and bias situate it only in those traditions with which I am most familiar. In fact, I believe that digital rhetoric is an interdisciplinary endeavor that can as easily be situated in departments of communication or English studies and that can be performed within both broad, well-established fields, like media studies, and newer, more narrowly focused approaches such as critical code studies (the relationship between digital rhetoric and these and other disciplines and fields is taken up in chapter 1 [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;trgt=div1_ch1;view=fulltext;xc=1], "Defining and Locating Digital Rhetoric").

My technology literacy narrative wends its way from the early days of the personal computer, through a detour into using the mainframe systems in college, to writing my first web page and joining a community of scholars whose interests and work focused on the intersections of rhetoric, writing, and technology. [2] [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=No_2;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1] I will spend some time detailing my work as the editor of an online journal and the ways that my understanding of rhetoric (and digital rhetoric more specifically) were shaped by my doctoral program and the friends and mentors that inhabited it. Each of these elements serves as a building block in the long process that leads me to claim "digital rhetoric" as both location and scholarly identity.

Following this history, I'll touch upon the problem of defining "digital rhetoric," address the question of audience for this work, and finally provide an overview of the goals and structure of the project.

Foreshadowing: Early Experiences with Computers

The first personal computer I encountered was the Apple II that appeared in my grade-school library (I was in sixth grade at the time, so it would have been 1979 or 1980). I was one of only a few students interested in using the machine, and I quickly discovered that one of the program disks was for a game called *Temple of Apshai*. In retrospect, I have noticed that the computer-as-gaming-platform has featured prominently in my continued interest in computers. I have always been more oriented to the humanities than to science and technology, but my interest in computer games helped me to see the computer not as a machine for computation so much as a new way to experience the stories embedded in the gameplay. Indeed, many of the early computer games I played were text-based adventure games, so I saw computers as reading-writing machines.

My interest in computers as tools for programming, though, really began in November of 1982, when I received a Timex/Sinclair TS1000 personal computer kit for my birthday. The idea of owning a computer that I could program (once I learned BASIC) was exciting not only because it seemed like I was participating in the world of the science fiction novels I read but also because I could bend the machine to my will through the use of simple programming commands.

But before I could exercise any power over the machine, I had to put it together. My first computer was also my first (and only) attempt to solder components onto a motherboard. My lack of success in this regard is likely

the moment when I realized I was more inclined to learn about software and programming than to build hardware. At the same time, I believe it was a positive experience in the sense that I could see how the machine was made up of a variety of components; the final result may have been a literal black box, but I'd had the opportunity to see what it was made of. The soldering episode has also stayed with me because it reminds me that the digital is inseparable from its material infrastructure. [3]

[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=No_3;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1]

A few years later, my family acquired a Commodore 64. Like the TS1000, we had to connect the computer's CPU to the family television, so my brothers and I would negotiate times to use it. On a very local level, the competition between user/producer (the computer) and receiver/watcher (the television) foreshadowed the perceptual split between interactive and mass media approaches to entertainment and connectivity during the 1990s and most of the first decade of the current century.

To the Mainframe and Back Again

In 1987, computers were not ubiquitous on campus. Very few students had computers at school; most of us had electric typewriters or basic word processors. At the small liberal arts school I attended, there were several computing labs around campus, each housing several terminals connected to a VAX mainframe.

One of my college roommates showed me how to customize my VAX account, send and receive e-mail, type and format papers for printing, and, perhaps most importantly, introduced me to the joys of staying up very late at night to chat with Japanese and Australian students using Internet Relay Chat (IRC). At the same time that I was exploring IRC, e-mail, and Usenet

News in the campus computer labs, my creative writing teacher was experimenting with posting writing prompts to our VAX accounts: we were to read and write responses to these prompts (although the end product was still printed out, rather than simply e-mailed to the teacher).

These experiences taught me that using the computer and the systems it was connected to was a means of communication—the computer was not just a place to store and manipulate information or perform difficult mathematical and statistical functions; it was also a gateway that we could use to learn about and communicate with other human beings. It might seem natural to us now to see our computers as linking us with other people, as we use Facebook, Twitter, and webcams to communicate with one another, but at that time computers were not considered social machines (and computer *users* were often stereotyped as distinctly antisocial).

When combined with experience and the expectations derived from prior experience, the metaphor we apply to our computing environment is a powerful rhetorical figure that shapes our reality and potentially limits our understanding of how computing systems can be used: as late as 1994 I found myself trying to educate university system administrators about this facet of computing—that computers could be used for pedagogical purposes beyond word processing, programming, and computation and that the Internet had valid uses in a writing class. [4] [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=N0_4;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1] In this case, the metaphor was of a single computing device rather than a networked communication portal. The lesson that I took from this experience is that how one is accustomed to using a technology tends to inscribe boundaries around acceptable or normal uses, and that suggesting new ways of using those familiar tools is often met with resistance. This same issue is also referenced in Hawisher et

al.'s (1996) history of the field of computers and writing: "Before the computer could be seen as a writer's helper, computer users had to make what Bernhardt has called *the Copernican turn* (C&W, 1994) and come to see the computer not as a computational device or data processor, as it had been seen since its invention, but as a writing instrument" (46).

Before returning to school for my MA degree in 1992, I worked for a semester as a "community consultant" in the writing center at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, which had a familiar and little-used VAX terminal—and I spent a good deal of time online when I wasn't working with student writers. It was through this connection that I discovered three things that would shape my scholarly interests and ultimately lead me to the field of computers and writing: an e-mail list of writing teachers who wanted to use technology in innovative but pedagogically sound ways (MegaByte University, or MBU-L); a text-based real-time interaction space similar to IRC called a MUD that hosted a weekly meeting of participants who posted on MBU-L; and a new way of storing, posting, and connecting information on the Internet using a program called Lynx to traverse the rather improbably named World Wide Web.

A Community of Technorhetoricians

Every Tuesday night, I would log on to MediaMoo [5] [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=No_5;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1] to join a vibrant and exciting group of people who were working in the field of computers and writing; these folks called themselves "technorhetoricians"—Eric Crump, founder of *RhetNet: A Cyberjournal for Rhetoric and Writing* (1995–1997), coined the term technorhetorician as a kind of shorthand for "rhetor-who-happens-to-study-the-rhetorical-features-of-technological-environments" (Crump, qtd.

in Doherty, 2001). [6] [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=N0_6;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1] I had created a character on MediaMoo and would go to the "Technorhetorician's Bar and Grill" to meet with the regulars—a group of quirky characters who were as interested in playing with/in these technologies as they were with seriously examining both affordances and limitations of these new applications for teaching writing.

In our weekly conversations, we discussed particular pedagogical approaches, asked each other technical questions, shared success and horror stories, and provided a much needed support system for people who were working against departmental and institutional resistance to their work with technology. Through my participation in these communities, I was introduced to the field's singular journal, *Computers and Composition* (still one of the best resources for work in computers and writing and digital rhetoric as scholarly practice), as well as a number of influential edited collections. Three of the collections that most influenced my own work (and eventually contributed to my understanding of "digital rhetoric") were Myron Tuman's (1992) *Literacy Online*, Hawisher and LeBlanc's (1992) *Reimagining Computers and Composition: Teaching and Research in a Virtual Age*, and Hawisher and Selfe's (1991) *Evolving Perspectives on Computers and Composition Studies*.

Tuman's collection features essays from a 1989 conference that focused on the impact of technology on literary studies; in each section two or more chapters consider the ways that computers have facilitated "new forms"—new forms of texts, new forms of teaching English, new forms of critical thought, new forms of administrative control, new forms of knowledge. It is in this final category that Richard Lanham's essay, "Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Practice, and Property," appears (the first use of the term and an important early articulation of making the connection between digital texts

and rhetorical theory—an overview of this work appears in the next chapter). It is fitting, I think, that Tuman placed Lanham's essay not in the sections on "new forms of text" or "new forms of critical thought" but in the broader approach to "new forms of knowledge."

As with Lanham's essay in *Literacy Online*, I found that each of the other two collections featured a chapter that stands out both in terms of its influence on my scholarly interests and in terms of contributing to a definition of digital rhetoric. In *Reimagining*, I was first drawn to Paul Taylor's "Social Epistemic Rhetoric and Chaotic Discourse" through his use of rhetorics of science and, in particular, the application of chaos theory as a lens for considering the possibilities of transactional rhetoric. [7] [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=No_7;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1] Taylor's essay resonated for me in part because I was at the time also learning about theories of composition and reading Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, and he neatly synthesized all of these theories in the context of a case study of electronic conferencing in a writing class.

John McDaid's "Toward an Ecology of Hypermedia" in *Evolving Perspectives* leans heavily on Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, arguing that "media are not passive conduits of information, but active shapers and massagers of messages. To fully apprehend the character of the world they bring us, we must see them as an ecosystem: interacting, shaping, and re-presenting our experience" (204). McDaid contrasts rhetorical characteristics of orality, (print) literacy, and hypermedia (the literacy of which he calls "digitality") in terms of author, text, and audience and similarly contrasts the characteristics of oral, literate, and digital cultures via a matrix that includes media, mind, universe, culture, and technology (208–16).

These works were my introduction to the field of computers and writing, and between a rapid immersion in the scholarship of the field and my continued participation in the online discussions and e-mail list, I quickly became convinced that this was my academic home. My next step was to attend my first Computers and Writing conference, held in Logan, Utah, in 1996. [8] [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=N0_8;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1] At this conference, I learned about the history of computers and writing (this was the twelfth Computers and Writing Conference [9] [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=N0_9;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1]; 1996 also saw the publication of Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, and Selfe's *Computers and the Teaching of Writing in American Higher Education, 1979–1994: A History*). Perhaps the most important aspect of this conference was the time I spent with the founding editors of *Kairos: A Journal for Teachers of Writing in Webbed Environments*, which ultimately lead to an invitation to join the editorial staff.

The Kairos of *Kairos*

I joined the staff of *Kairos* as CoverWeb editor in 1997. The CoverWeb was supposed to be a multiauthored, multivocal cross-linked collection of individual webtexts that would focus on a particular theme in each issue (such as disability studies online or copyright and intellectual property issues). The CoverWeb was an interesting idea in theory, but in practice it never really lived up to its potential. In 2000 I became chief editor for a brief time and then served as coeditor with James Inman before finally transitioning to senior editor and publisher in 2006. In my current role, I am responsible for personnel decisions, big picture issues focusing on our mission and goals, and working to maintain the technical infrastructure. I make final corrections to all the webtexts and perform a code-edit before building each issue's table of contents and releasing the issue for public

distribution. I am eternally grateful to have the indefatigable Cheryl Ball as chief editor—she works with the editorial staff, the editorial board, and the peer-review process, and she makes sure each issue gets out on time.

Kairos began as an experiment in scholarly publishing developed by a group of energetic and forward-thinking graduate students who wanted to see the web used to create new scholarly forms (there was some frustration with reading the work of scholars who were adept at critiquing these new kinds of online texts but who could not themselves produce anything like them). [10] [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=N0_10;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1]

My own first article appeared in issue 1.2 and by current design standards, the best that I can say is that it is at least readable. But as the use of the web became ubiquitous, and more scholars began paying attention to and seeing value in learning about design and even coding, the quality of the work we published continually improved. We also shifted focus slightly, changing our subtitle from "A Journal for Teachers of Writing in Webbed Environments" to "A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy." We currently publish between two and three issues per year, and the acceptance rate for our peer-reviewed webtexts averages around 10 percent. As we have continued to publish innovative scholarly works, we have enjoyed increased popularity—we're currently recording around fifty thousand individual readers per month, arriving from more than 180 different countries. [11] [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;id=N0_11;note=ptr;rgn=div1;view=trgt;xc=1]

One of the more interesting aspects of my experience as editor of the journal is being exposed to such a wide range of design approaches and choices (even if those choices sometimes conflict with our technology

standards). There are times when an author creates a work where the design really carries the argument, just as much as (or more so) than the text (one of the best examples of meaning enacted through design is Anne Wysocki's [2002] "A Bookling Monument," which required the user to interact with both text and image in order to really understand and "see" the argument unfold). There has also been a marked increase in the use of multimedia; we still receive works that are primarily print and code (HTML and CSS), but we are just as likely to receive work that is primarily audio, or video, or a combination of text, audio, and video. We have also published works that use wiki and blog platforms as well.

I will return to works that we have published in the journal when I address digital rhetoric practice (in terms of scholarship), as we have published a significant number of webtexts that both address and enact digital rhetoric. I would say that it is because of my work at *Kairos* that I first became interested in multimodal/multimedia composition and it was through the journal that I was first introduced to the many facets of rhetorical theory and method as applied to (and facilitating the production of) digital texts.

From Composition to Rhetoric to Digital Rhetoric

In 2003, I enrolled in Michigan State University's then-new doctoral program in writing and rhetoric. It was through that program that I began to fully apprehend the power and facility of rhetoric, and I shifted my disciplinary identity from composition teacher to rhetorician. One of the courses I took as a graduate student was called "Digital Rhetoric," taught by Dànielle DeVoss. Because there were very few works explicitly addressing digital rhetoric in 2004, the class worked together to develop a definition and shared understanding. As a result of that investigation, a number of students and faculty decided to create a digital rhetoric research collective

that we christened digirhet.net (making a play on a URL while also calling attention to the notion that we could work as and in a network formation). The name has been fluid, like the networks we study, changing to digirhet.org in our first publication and simply digirhet in the second. Based on work in that course, our collective published an article on teaching digital rhetoric in *Pedagogy* (see chapter 4 [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;trgt=div1_ch4;view=fulltext;xc=1] , "Digital Rhetoric: Practice," for an overview). Based on my experience at *Kairos*, it seemed a natural progression to decide that digital rhetoric is what I would study and what I would do. And so I did, and I completed my dissertation in 2007, which theorized digital rhetoric in terms of circulation in and through digital ecologies and participating in digital economies, revised portions of which appear in chapter 2 [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;trgt=div1_ch2;view=fulltext;xc=1] ("Digital Rhetoric: Theory") and chapter 3 [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;trgt=div1_ch3;view=fulltext;xc=1] ("Digital Rhetoric: Method").

Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice

In *Virtualpolitik* (2009), Elizabeth Losh traces the term "digital rhetoric" to Richard Lanham's "Digital Rhetoric and the Digital Arts" (1992), which was an early influence on my own thinking about how one would define digital rhetoric. The next time I encountered the term was in an article in *College Composition and Communication* by Mary Hocks—her definition asserts that "digital rhetoric describes a system of ongoing dialogue and negotiations among writers, audiences, and institutional contexts, but it focuses on the multiple modalities available for making meaning using new communication and information technologies" (2003, 632). From my

perspective, there had been a fairly extensive gap between Lanham's coining of the term and the next attempt to define and use it. But midway through my doctoral program, I encountered James Zappen's article on digital rhetoric, which serves in a roundabout way as a model for this text. In 2005, Zappen argued that current work toward developing digital rhetoric has thus far resulted in "an amalgam of more-or-less discrete components rather than a complete and integrated theory in its own right. These discrete components nonetheless provide at least a partial outline for such a theory, which has potential to contribute to the larger body of rhetorical theory and criticism" (323); this lack of "an integrated theory" seemed to me a perfect opening for my own work toward understanding, defining, and shaping a vision of digital rhetoric (although I have moved from seeking an integrated theory to articulating digital rhetoric theories and methods).

Although scholars such as Elizabeth Losh (2009) and Ian Bogost (2007) have addressed and critiqued the idea of digital rhetoric, no comprehensive digital rhetoric text has yet been published; thus this volume aims to provide an overview and synthesis of the work that has been done on the development of a digital rhetoric theory and also to provide a framework that situates digital rhetoric as an interdisciplinary field of inquiry in its own right. Depending on where the field boundaries are drawn, and what counts as digital rhetoric theory, it is possible to claim a fairly extensive literature as falling within the purview of the field: the term "digital rhetoric" itself has been applied to rhetorics of technology, network rhetorics, social media use, the use of rhetorical appeals in online discussion forums, website design, multimodal composition, and the study of new media (itself a contested term). If we see digital rhetoric as a productive art, then nearly all digital texts can be seen both as objects of study for analysis (using digital rhetoric methods) and as products of digital rhetoric practices. Rather than attempt to provide a comprehensive

representation of all that is or could be digital rhetoric, I have chosen to be fairly selective in my overview, first considering works that have explicitly used the term "digital rhetoric" (or some variant thereof) and then expanding to theories, methods, and practices that implicitly draw on digital rhetoric. In the case of methods, I also look at a range of related fields' approaches that would be available for rearticulation as digital rhetoric methods.

My overall goal is to provide a map of digital rhetoric as an emergent field, focusing on its history, definition, and development as an academic field by looking at the theories that inform digital rhetoric scholarship, the methods used to carry out digital rhetoric research, and the practices that lead to the production of digital texts. I have included not just a review of extant literature (accompanied by critical commentary and a consideration of the contexts and histories of those works) but also my own work, particularly in terms of developing new theories and new methods for working with "born-digital" texts. The book aims to serve as a comprehensive introduction for scholars and students new to the field and for scholars from other fields who find their work intersecting with that of digital rhetoric. I am also making a strong claim for the field identity of digital rhetoric, and I hope it will also serve as a contribution to the field at large as well as promote a visible platform for its continued development. I also suggest that digital rhetoricians have much to offer other fields, such as game studies, human-computer interaction, and Internet studies (as well as close allies such as rhetoric/composition, communication, and media studies), so it may serve as an introduction that digital rhetoricians can recommend to colleagues in other areas as well.

User's Guide

I originally conceived of this project as a traditional (print) text, but

through the good fortune of publication by the University of Michigan Press, it has evolved into a dual-natured work, available in both print and digital formats. While a born-digital version of this project would be quite interesting and more interactive, the outcome would be radically different—much of the review of the literature and explication of definitions, theories, and methods presented here simply works better in the traditional academic discursive form. Thus, the differences between the print and digital versions are relatively slight: the online version includes live links and, where appropriate, I have added images, screenshots, and embedded videos (the majority of these are in the final chapter of the book, which focuses on digital rhetoric practice).

Additionally, my hope is that this project is useful for students, scholars, and others interested in digital rhetoric, both in terms of application and identification. I have therefore organized the book into four main parts, each of which focuses on one critical element of digital rhetoric as both field and research methodology. These chapters are independent—that is, they need not be read in order and do not follow a narrative arc or develop a unifying argument over the course of all four sections. Each section of the book also represents a basic overview rather than a comprehensive treatment of all possible theories, methods, or practices; each of the final three chapters also ends with a call to build upon and expand the work presented here.

A Brief Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;trgt=div1_ch1;view=fulltext;xc=1] provides a **definition** of "digital rhetoric" that distinguishes it from the generalized field of rhetoric and from related areas of concern, chiefly "digital literacy" and "new media." After establishing the working definitions for the book,

this first section provides the argument for a view of digital rhetoric as a distinct scholarly field. As an interdisciplinary field, it is tied to the work of several disciplines: rhetoric and writing, composition, technical communication, digital game studies, literacy studies, media (and new media) studies, human-computer interaction, and other interdisciplinary fields such as Internet studies.

Chapter 2 [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;trgt=div1_ch2;view=fulltext;xc=1] examines **theories** of digital rhetoric (and their relations to classical and contemporary rhetorical theory).

Chapter 3 [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;trgt=div1_ch3;view=fulltext;xc=1] looks at **research methods** for digital rhetoric, examining current rhetorical and writing studies methods, methods from other fields that might be applied to digital rhetoric research, and a call for the development of new, "born-digital" research methods.

Chapter 4 [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/13030181.0001.001/--digital-rhetoric-theory-method-practice?g=dculture;trgt=div1_ch4;view=fulltext;xc=1] provides a series of case studies and examples that focus on digital rhetoric as **practice**—in terms of pedagogy, scholarship, and performance.

Future Digital Enhancements

In a future edition of the digital text, I hope to implement a "remix engine"—a system that will allow readers to pull elements from the book, edit them, rearrange them, add additional content, and share the results with others. My programming skills are not quite up to this task as of yet, and I feel that the increased interest in digital rhetoric means that it is more

important to provide this overview now and to add additional functionality as soon as I am able.

I welcome suggestions for future editions, and I hope that you will find this text a useful resource.