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From Screen to Screen: Students' Use of Popular Culture Genres in Multimodal Writing Assignments

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Abstract

As digital media have created the opportunity to compose multimodal texts, there has been growing attention paid to how best to define and teach genres such as videos or podcasts, to writing students. What has gone largely unexamined, however, is the influence of popular culture genres on students' conceptions of and approaches to composing multimodal texts. Yet much of students' engagement with texts outside the classroom revolves around popular culture, whether offline in the form of film and television or online with digital media such as online video and computer games. This essay explores, through student interviews and textual analysis, how student responses to multimodal assignments in college writing courses draw on popular culture genres, both explicitly and implicitly, in ways that students find unremarkable, but of which their instructors are often unaware. We must make productive use of the connections–and tensions–created when students' employ their knowledge of popular culture genres for multimodal projects.

Keywords: Popular Culture; Genre; Composing Processes; Multimodality

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While you were still explaining the assignment, I thought about doing a music video. Music is a big deal for me so I turned to that right away. I was listening to Pink Floyd, obviously, and I was like "Oh, that's cool, how 'Money' opens with all the different sounds." And I thought "Hey, I could do that."–Cathy[1]

> I knew I wanted to make a video about my research about fantasy football and how it changes how fans watch the games. So I thought about how to use the familiar ways we see sports to comment on that. I didn't want to just do another music-video looking thing. As soon as I made that decision I had this vision of a football video game that I knew I wanted to use.–Marie

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[1] All student names are pseudonyms

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When students are given assignments that ask them to produce texts for screens, they often turn initially for their models to the screens they already know from popular culture. In terms of rhetorical and semiotic resources, as well as inspiration, they turn to the popular culture with which they are deeply familiar. While it shouldn't surprise us that students are familiar with popular culture genres, it is not clear that we engage their knowledge effectively when it comes to multimodal literacy practices

In recent years scholars have examined the role of genre in student writing (Bawarshi, 2003; Devitt, 2004) as well as the influence of genres outside the classroom on student writing (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Dunbar-Odom, 2007; Knobel, 1999; Williams, 2002, 2009). As digital media have created the opportunity to compose multimodal texts, there has been growing attention paid to how best to define and teach genres of multimodal texts, such as videos or podcasts, to writing students (Selfe, 2009; Wysocki, 2004). When it has come time to consider the multimodal genres students encounter outside the classroom, however, most of the attention has been paid to finding out whether students have already created videos or podcasts or webpages on their own. What has gone largely unexamined is the influence of popular culture genres on students' conceptions of and approaches to composing these kinds of digital multimodal texts. Yet much of students' engagement with texts outside the classroom revolves around popular culture, whether offline in the form of film and television or online with digital media such as online video and computer games. In this essay I explore, through student interviews and textual analysis, how student responses to digital video and image-focused multimodal assignments in college writing courses draw on popular culture genres. Though there are many ways to define and employ the term "multimodal," for brevity's sake, in this article, I am using the term to refer specifically to digital projects that ask students to employ video or images. I examine how popular culture genres influence students' composing practices, both explicitly and implicitly, in ways that students find unremarkable, but of which their instructors are often unaware. I focus, in particular, on how the students in different sections of the same course I taught turned to popular culture genres when given a multimodal composition assignment. In both courses I draw from the texts students composed and from interviews I conducted with them after the semester had ended. While students in both courses used popular culture content and genres in their projects, their critical awareness of genre and their analytical depth changed depending on whether I taught explicitly about the genre conventions that shape popular culture texts.

The interviews with students illustrate that, when faced with composing for a text that will be seen on a screen, the students turned to their familiarity with popular culture genres of film, television, and video games to help them make sense of the rhetorical, narrative, and stylistic demands of the new assignment. In the interviews the students discussed how they conceived of their compositions in the contexts of popular culture genres with which they were familiar, regardless of whether they had discussed such genres in class. What this illustrates is that popular culture genres, then, enter our classrooms and influence students' multimodal composing practices regardless of whether instructors address the genres explicitly.

On the one hand, students' use of popular culture genres as a rhetorical and semiotic resources for their course work can result in texts that are creative and engaging. The problem can be that, without explicit conversations about popular culture genre conventions and how they might or might not work in course assignments, the use of the genre conventions can sometimes not fulfill the instructor's goals for the assignment. The tensions that can develop when students try to adapt one genre to fit another, in any context, can bewilder and frustrate students and instructors alike. Yet, when popular culture genres were discussed in class, the students demonstrated a more critical perspective on their own work, as well as more innovative moves in understanding and working popular culture genres. Interviews with students also demonstrated that digital media were resulting in new and evolving popular culture genres—such as YouTube videos—that students draw on in the same way they draw on film and television.

This project has pedagogical implications for how we can make productive use of the connections—and tensions—created when students employ their knowledge of popular culture genres for multimodal projects. If we are serious in composition about the role antecedent genres have on students' work in the classroom, then we must pay attention to the popular culture texts with which students have so much experience. I argue that if we address in more direct and creative ways the role of popular culture's influences in multimodal composing, we will engage students in a more sophisticated and critical awareness of the intersections between popular culture genres and multimodal writing assignments. Such pedagogical approaches will help students become more critically conscious in creating their texts for our classes and more thoughtful in their engagement with popular culture and questions of genre outside the writing classroom.

1. The ambivalence toward popular culture in the classroom

Rhetoric and composition's ambivalent relationship with popular culture has continued into the digital age. There is substantial research, including work predating widespread digital media use, to demonstrate the influence of students' deep experience with popular culture on their knowledge of rhetoric and genre, as well as their approaches to writing and reading assignments in the classroom (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Williams, 2002). For example, the emphasis on plot and the resolution of narrative conflicts on much of film and television—and this includes reality and news programs—are more familiar and easier to interpret for students, compared with the less familiar texts that might emphasize argument (Williams, 2002). These scholars and others have made a compelling case for engaging in the classroom the discursive and rhetorical knowledge students bring from popular culture. Yet, for many in the field, popular culture remains a silly or even dangerous influence that is either ignored when it comes to thinking about pedagogy, or even critiqued as antithetical to the goals of a college writing course (Bradbury, 2011; Fitts, 2005). Even instructors who do incorporate popular culture into writing courses often do so primarily as a means of providing "relevant content" for critique (Bishop, 1999; Faulkner, 2011; Huffines, 2008; Roach, 2008), rather than as a source of rhetorical conversation or teaching composing practices. These approaches to popular culture are prevalent not only in scholarship, but also in many popular composition textbooks.

The advent of digital technologies has resulted in further research that confirms that student engagement with popular culture—now often in participatory practices—remains extensive (Black, 2008; Darowski & Smith, 2010; Davies, 2006; Thomas, 2007; Gee, 2004; Abrams, Gerber, & Burgess, 2012; Huang & Archer, 2012; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010; Williams, 2009, 2012). Yet the ambivalence, or sometimes even resistance, to considering how students engage with popular culture remains in discussions of how to teach multimodal texts involving video and images. In the rhetoric and composition scholarship on multimodal composing, popular culture is only occasionally referenced, and then usually not connected to questions of genres and student writing. For example, Glynda Hull and Mark Evan Nelson (2005) paid attention to genre and genre conventions in the ways that students construct multimodal digital narratives. Justin Hodgson (2010) wrote about the "small screen culture" in which students were immersed and some of the genre conventions of remixing and sampling that took place on sites such as YouTube. Indeed, Hodgson (2010) talked about genre moves in videos, such as dissolves, and the need to engage with students about such rhetorical and stylistic genre conventions. Yet in these, as in a number of other articles about multimodal composing, the discussion of genre does not address students' engagement or potential knowledge of popular culture genres. Also, for some scholars, popular culture continues to be constructed as a problem to be solved or an influence to be resisted. Barbara Duffelmeyer and Anthony Ellertson (2005), for example, saw popular culture texts as being presented to, "a largely passive audience whose capacity to speak back is limited due to the implied 'specifications' and 'roles' imposed on us in these structured communication environments" (para. 14). They saw their role as providing students the critical education to regard popular culture as a threat to be moved beyond, rather than an engagement with popular culture texts in their composing.

Other digital media scholarship does touch on popular culture. For example, Abby Dubisar and Jason Palmeri (2010) discussed how students in a political rhetoric course watched and analyzed popular culture texts such as *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live* before creating a video remix on a political issue. And Cheryl Ball and Ryan Moeller (2008) questioned the high culture/low culture split often implicit in discussions of scholarly and creative texts, and touched on some digital media texts that touched on or contain popular culture content. Yet, in these examples, popular culture was not discussed in terms of how students' knowledge of antecedent genres might influence their conception and composing of multimodal assignments. It is true that issues of genre awareness and pedagogy were not necessarily the project of these scholars; still it is instructive to point out that the field has not engaged questions of genre in this way. It is also useful to understand that such attention to antecedent genres and popular culture is not necessarily prevalent in secondary literacy pedagogy either. Consequently the question of whether students have produced multimodal texts in high school, even if they have employed popular culture content and elements, does not mean they have engaged in a critical examination of genre and how it works, as this research will demonstrate.

2. Antecedent genres and student writers

Yet in the field of rhetoric and composition it is generally accepted that antecedent genres matter when it comes to teaching writing; there has been a concerted move in recent years to conceive of genre as more than conventions

present in a given text. As a number of theorists have argued, genre is more productively perceived as the result of social actions and relationships that are mediated through particular texts (Devitt, 2000; Frow, 2006; Kress, 2003). Consequently, genre simultaneously shapes and is shaped by these social relationships and actions that are enacted through rhetoric. Genre perception and use, as with any rhetorical action, is highly contextual, which means that as the rhetorical needs of the cultural context shift, so will the elements we perceive as constituting genres. Charles Bazerman (1997) compared genre to landscapes of communication we inhabit and travel through:

> The symbolic landscape we have constructed for us to live in is precisely that which most fits us and the others with whom we share it. . When we travel to new communicative domains, we construct our perception of them beginning with the forms we know. Even our motives and desire to participate in what the new landscape appears to offer start from motives and desires framed in earlier landscapes. (Bazerman, 1997, p. 19)

Such a metaphor points to the need to adapt our performances of genre to new environments, new social situations. At the same time, however, it reminds us that our adaptations are necessarily grounded in the knowledge and experience we bring from what is familiar to us.

Digital technologies have offered particularly vivid examples of genre development and negotiation. The flexibility of digital media, to be able to mold digital data into multiple modes and then store and distribute it easily (Manovich, 2001), changes the speed with which new rhetorical spaces are available. As digital media provide new opportunities for composing and communicating, we see online spaces that result in new genres definitions happening much more quickly than could have happened with print-on-paper technologies (Carpenter, 2009). It's not long after the sites go online that we hear people talk of a YouTube video or Twitter post in terms of their generic characteristics.

In terms of teaching writing, the rethinking of genre reflecting rhetorical and social actions has led to questions of how students' experiences with genre outside the classroom affects their work on writing assignments. We've long accepted in the field that when students are asked to write in a genre unfamiliar to them, they will draw on "antecedent genres" in their writing (Jamieson, 1975). Yet such rhetorical moves do not necessarily produce writing that fulfills the expectations of the new genre. More recent research by Amy Devitt (2000) confirmed that students did draw on their knowledge of antecedent genres when they tried to negotiate writing in new rhetorical situations with unfamiliar genre expectations (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). Devitt (2000) further noted that students' uses of antecedent genres was not always an explicitly articulated choice, but often resulted from their use of what they considered to be their general knowledge or experience (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). The turn to antecedent genres for guidance does not always result in work that is satisfactory to the reader in terms of genre expectations, however. Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff (2010) note Devitt's research as illustrative of how students respond to encounters with new genres:

> While both Devitt's study and Anson et al's study show that prior genre knowledge may hinder, as well as help, genre performance, Devitt convincingly concludes that "writers use the genres they know when faced with a genre they do not know," and while these genres may not meet the needs of the new situation, "as antecedent genres, they help writers move into a new genre; they help writers adjust their old situations to new locations." (p. 124)

The implications this research holds for pedagogy is that students will adapt to new rhetorical and generic situations more effectively when they think about genre as a flexible and intertextual concept. Rather than being taught genre as a set of forms to be mastered, the recent scholarship in rhetoric and composition has argued for teaching students that genres work as networks that interact with each other and are employed most effectively in response to particular rhetorical contexts. Such an approach moves us beyond arguments about whether students should be explicitly taught specific conventions of unfamiliar genres, and instead helps us focus on how to help students work with the complex, intertextual knowledge they have of their antecedent genres and how those can help them understand how to recognize and work within new rhetorical expectations.

When rhetoric and composition scholars talk about antecedent genres, they often focus on the print texts that students have written or read in school. How, for example, does a student accustomed to writing personal narratives fare when trying to adapt that experience to writing an analytical paper? Yet, the genres that students engage with far more than any school-based genre are those from popular culture. As a growing body of research has established (Alvermann, 2008; Black, 2008; Buckingham, 2007; Keller, 2007; Thomas, 2007; Williams, 2002, 2009), students' deep experiences with popular culture genres, from film to television to music to video games, allow them to negotiate those genres with confidence and critical acumen. Students can not only define genres such as romantic comedy film, reality television

show, or first-person shooter video game, they can also describe genre characteristics from production style, setting, character, plot, or other elements. Students also understand how the demands of a particular genre shape the nature of the texts that are produced. For example, a student interested in the first film made about a comic book hero can talk about whether it conformed to the expectations of the superhero "origin story." Though they may not express their interpretations and critiques in academic terms with which we are familiar, if we pay attention to what they are saying about the popular culture texts they read, we will hear them talk knowledgeably about genre conventions and expectations (Williams, 2002, 2009).

At the same time it is important to realize that, when it comes to multimodal texts, for many students there is no referent in terms of genre beyond popular culture texts. A student, over an academic career, will encounter a number of print texts in school that look nothing like popular culture, such as textbooks and other readings. Students often try to copy or adopt the conventions of these genres into their writing for classes, with varying success. But there is little in the way of non-popular-culture multimodal work that students will have encountered in their academic lives. Instead, they will have much more access and experience with popular culture content and genres from outside of class, compared with anything they will have been shown or worked on in school.

3. Antecedent genres in the multimodal classroom

In order to explore further how students' antecedent popular culture genres influence their multimodal composing, I conducted a study of two courses I taught that involved multimodal writing assignments. While I have been noting students' uses of popular culture in digital assignments for more than a decade in the courses I teach, I did not have more than anecdotal evidence of these rhetorical and composing moves. It was the anecdotal evidence that led me to construct this research project. Although it is important not to overstate the conclusions that can be drawn from a project that engages two courses, the results were sufficiently dramatic to offer implications for how we approach antecedent popular culture genres in our classes as well as further research that could take place along these same lines. In one semester, we discussed genre conventions of multimodal texts in terms of the assignment and other academic or student examples, but I did not introduce any explicit examination or discussion of the kinds of multimodal texts in popular culture with which the students might be most familiar. We discussed concepts such as design, composition, camera angles, editing, etc., but all within the context of the class or examples from academic or course-based examples. We discussed concepts of genre, but within the context of the academic writing they had done or encountered in classes. In the next semester, I introduced a more explicit conversation about popular culture genres and the antecedent genres students knew from outside the classroom. We began with discussions of what they understood about genre from their experiences with popular culture. We then talked about genre conventions further as we looked at examples from popular culture. Finally, we discussed how the genres that dominate popular culture and the conventions they typically employ did or did not fit with the expectations of the assignment and the rhetorical context of the course.

The course was an upper-level writing course and the students were split almost evenly between English majors and majors from other departments. The students' experiences with and expertise in composing with digital media ranged from a few who had a great deal of experience to some with virtually none, with most students falling in between, having done a bit of rudimentary blog writing or website or video composing in high school or other college classes. Most students' experiences with multimodal texts were as readers, not writers. The focus of the course was on evolving conceptions of literacy—including, but not limited to digital media. I simultaneously assigned the students a researched essay, in traditional print form, about literacy practices in an area of interest or in their major, as well as a digital text based on the same research. I interviewed six students from each class at the end of the semester. The students represented a range of experience with multimodal composing and a range of majors.

4. The first semester: Form and irony

Allison's video, on how people use writing on social media sites to perform their identities for others, began with a series of titles. There was, of course, the title of the video—"A Network of Possibilities"—but there were also titles announcing that it was "A Happy Times Inc. Production," and it was "In Conjunction With Arnold's Pizza," and then that it was "A Film by Allison Watson." These titles faded in and out on a black background with guitar-based theme music behind them. The film then began with a close-up of fingers typing on keyboard with new music—Owl City's "Hello Seattle"—and then cut to a shot of the typist's face. All of these genre conventions, from background music to

title cards to the sequence of shots in the video, were familiar from film. Indeed, the use of title cards is pervasive in film and video, as are titles on books and articles. What is interesting about Allison's video, however, is how she employed some of the secondary genre characteristics that mark popular culture film, such as the credits to a fictitious production company and sponsor. At the end of the video, as the credits roll, she included a set of humorous outtakes, just as so many mainstream comedies do today. Allison's video was structured around the plot conventions of contemporary romantic comedies, such as mismatched couples meeting and so on. Her print research essay, though focused on the performance of identity on social networking sites, did not specifically focus on issues of dating or romance, but explored instead more general ideas about literacy practices and identity online. Before beginning the multimodal assignment for this course, Allison, an Elementary Education major, had never made a video, but she was a huge fan of romantic comedies. When asked to create a multimodal text, without any explicit conversation about antecedent genres, she moved to create a text from a familiar genre and drew specifically on the conventions of that genre. In addition to illustrating the allure of the familiarity of antecedent genres, Allison's video also provides an example of how importing the conventions of the antecedent genre shape the new text. A viewer of her video would assume that her focus for the project was dating and romance, while the print essay did not focus on that in any significant way. This shift in focus is not necessarily a bad thing and, in fact, demonstrates how remediating a text can reveal new possibilities of focus and meaning. Yet, in Allison's case, it was not a matter of her intending to shift the focus in her video, as she explained to me later, it just happened when she moved to the genre conventions of the romantic comedy.

Unlike Allison, Cathy had substantial experience creating multimodal texts, from websites to videos, both for herself and for courses in her Communication major. Like Allison, however, she turned immediately to familiar popular culture genres for inspiration and formal conventions to complete the assignment. As she noted in the quotation that opens this article, her mind had turned to music videos as the genre in which she intended to work. She created a video about the production process of the student newspaper, shot like a music video using the Pink Floyd song, "Money." She used many of the genre conventions of music videos such as synchronizing music and movement, quick montage editing, and so on. As she told me after the course was over, her experience with music videos as a genre was extensive:

> I love music videos. I couldn't begin to count how many I've seen. I used to do music videos on my own. I did one of "Eleanor Rigby." I was every character in "Eleanor Rigby" when I was 13. It was fun. I did this on the weekends and it was pretty cool. I liked doing stuff like that.

As Cathy's experience indicated, the level of experience the students had with multimodal composing did not make a difference in terms of how they turned to popular culture genres for their multimodal projects.

Yet, even given her experience with creating video projects, it is interesting to note that Cathy chose the genre of a music video because it was familiar, not because she thought it would more or less effective in getting her point across to her audience. In addition, like Allison, the importing of popular culture content necessary to create a music video shifted the focus of Cathy's digital text from that of her print text. While Cathy's print text focused on the journalistic functions of the newspaper, as did the images in her video, the effect of the choosing the song "Money" added a layer of meaning about the financial aspects of the newspaper. Cathy said she chose the song because of the sounds and rhythms involved and didn't think about how the content and genre she was sampling might shift her meaning. When she presented the video in class, some of the students expressed confusion about how the song and images were supposed to work together because her peers' genre expectations of music videos prepared them to have the music and images complement each other.

Cathy's project, like many in the class, sampled popular culture content. The development of digital media intensified and broadened the sampling and circulations of popular culture content as individuals could now appropriate and reuse pieces of a text. The allure of popular culture content for students' multimodal compositions, whether in school or outside of it, is not difficult to understand. The use of popular culture is perceived as a low-stakes activity. Students feel they have control over making meaning of popular culture. Many students also regard popular culture as "unauthored" in both the sense that they often don't recognize the individual author of a video game or television program, and that the content is owned by corporations from whom sampling poses little economic threat (Williams, 2009). Also, the ubiquity of popular culture makes it the content—and by extension the genre—that students turn to first when they think about electronic representations of images, video, or music. Such perceptions of popular culture, and students' eagerness to turn to popular culture for the content of such projects, raises issues of intellectual property that are important to raise in class. How such questions are best addressed is beyond the scope of this article, but is part of an ongoing scholarly conversation in the field.

The acts of sampling and remixing shape genres in two ways. First, the use of sampled material becomes a genre characteristic, seen for example in online genres such as memes or YouTube "poop" videos. In fact, some refer to online remixes as a video genre. Sampling and remixing also affect genre by importing content from other popular culture genres. Whether the material is used sincerely or ironically (as in the YouTube "poop" videos), the use of material from another source brings with it the genre characteristics of the original source. So, for example, an image of a space ship may be from a film a person has seen or not, but will certainly reference, for the viewer, the genre conventions of science fiction films. Even a remix that uses images from a family film, such as *Mary Poppins*, remixed to seem like a trailer for a horror film, still connects the viewer with the knowledge of the conventions of a family film.

As genre scholars have argued in the context of student writing, trying to import antecedent genre conventions in to composing a text in a new genre can lead to unsuccessful hybrids and unintended consequences in texts. In students' multimodal composing, one way this can manifest itself is in the use of irony or sentimentality. Irony and sentimentality abound in popular culture, and it shouldn't surprise us if students turn to them in the form of particular genre conventions. Yet these uses of irony and sentimentality may move uneasily into the discourse of the classroom.

David's video is an example of the turn to irony. He juxtaposed short questions or phrases, such as "Sometimes don't you want to run from being connected all the time?" with clips from films such as *Terminator 2* where character Sarah Connor is running away from the Terminator. Other phrases were juxtaposed with clips from movies such as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. The point of these juxtapositions was primarily for the quick joke the ironic combinations could provide, rather than any exploration in depth of an idea. In his interview, David, a biology major, said that humor was as much a part of his intent as the communication of an idea:

> I wanted it to make a point, but also to be fun for people. That's most of the point of the *Ferris Bueller* and the other clips, is to keep people watching it and enjoying it. It's like YouTube stuff, the way you cut and paste them.

Allison, in her video, also parodied the conventions of film and romantic comedies, from the title sequence to the stereotypical characters she included, such as the comic-relief best friend. She said, "It seemed easy to do a parody of the types of people you see in romantic comedies. The girl looking for love, her funny friends—that kind of thing that people would know about." The justification and allure of using irony and parody in these compositions was the desire to entertain the audience, as it is when parody and irony are used in much popular culture. Beyond amusing themselves and those in the class, the purpose and effect of irony was left unexplored. It is important to keep people watching, to make it look like texts they've seen before, but there was not a critical interrogation or exploration of genre use or theory in these comments.

Irony is, of course, often a useful rhetorical device that can be used for satire and critique and can be used this way in popular culture on programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. Irony in popular culture can be a useful site for discussion in a writing class to point out to students how they have learned to step back from a text and comment on it (Seitz, 2011; Williams, 2002). But irony, for all its uses, is not the same as analysis. Rather than leading to in-depth critique or analysis, irony in popular culture very often begins and ends with the joke. When students employ irony in the genre conventions they've learned from popular culture, the project of the text also often begins and ends with the joke rather than engaging the larger intellectual project we might want to see undertaken in our classes. The use of parody and irony is just one example of how, in a class that did not explicitly address the antecedent popular culture genres familiar to students and how they might influence their approach to the assignment, students employed the popular culture genre conventions on their own.

It is interesting that students often discussed the audience for the multimodal compositions as their peers while the audience for the print essay was the instructor. The majority of students said they were glad they were able to present their multimodal texts, but they would not have wanted to present on their print texts. Indeed, when I asked them, all but one of the students said they made their digital texts with their peers as much the intended audience as the teacher. Yet they said that print texts, even during peer review, were regarded as being written for the teacher alone. The construction of audience in these circumstances also helps explain the turn to popular culture texts and genres. Not only did the students think the use of popular culture would make the work appealing to their peers, it was also the case that students often regard popular culture as a cultural resource over which they had ownership and control, in contrast to print texts which were regarded as the domain of institutions and authority figures (Williams, 2009).

What is most important about the digital projects in this semester of the course was not whether they incorporated popular culture genres, but that, in their reflective letters at the end of the course and in interviews, they did so

somewhat reflexively and in ways that were generally unreflective and uncritical of the genre conventions and how such conventions might work in the setting of a classroom assignment.

5. The second semester: Mixing genres and making arguments

In the next semester when I taught the course, where there was explicit instruction about popular culture genres and the role of antecedent genres in writing, there was a significant difference in how they approached the use of popular culture in their compositions.

As Marie's quote at the start of the article indicated, popular culture genres were still an important source of form and content for the students in the course. Just as with the students in the previous semester, these students turned for inspiration, content, and guidance to the genres they were most familiar having seen on screens. Although it may be that the explicit discussion of popular culture also worked to encourage students to turn to such resources, they did not do so in greater or lesser numbers than students in the class that didn't discuss popular culture. The difference, then, was not in the use of popular culture, but was in the awareness of why and how they were drawing on popular culture texts and the effect the use might have on the texts they produce. This awareness was present in the interviews as well as in a number of the reflective letters students wrote about their projects. There was more discussion about the strengths and limitations of antecedent genres.

Marie, for example, was researching the literacy practices of fantasy football fans. An English major, she had virtually no experience with composing multimodal texts of any kind. Her first thoughts about her multimodal project led her to thinking about a video football game and how it displayed information over the players' heads. As she began to work through her ideas for her text, she realized that what she wanted to do, however, was not just work with a video game. Instead, she decided she wanted to argue that being in a fantasy football league changed how fans watched games as they paid more attention to how the individual players performed and earned fantasy points than they did about whether a team won or lost. Marie wanted to use clips from real football games but display fan points over players' heads in the form similar to what happens in video games, which would make explicit how fantasy fans viewed the contest on the field. As she said:

> If I blended together what the video games look like and sports broadcasts, with the fantasy football way of seeing a game, I could make it change the way you see all of them at once. So I just had to find a way to blend those.

Marie, like other students, used popular culture content for her composition. Yet her approach to genre involved not just a simple importing or parody of an existing genre. Instead, Marie's work mixed genres in a conscious, thoughtful way for a specific rhetorical effect. Her work illustrated that she was learning that different genres were often flexible and fluid when they came into contact with each other in a new context. By combining the conventions of the football video game and the football sportscast, she was able to illustrate how perceptions of fans had changed. Her approach to the more creative and exploratory use of the antecedent genres with which she was familiar was reflected in a comment from another student, Sarah, who created a video using images to illustrate—and resist—lyrics in a song. Sarah said:

> When you dig into the song, or the pictures too, you get to see that they didn't have to be done that way. I could see that they made choices and that gives me the chance to pull it apart and make my own choices, that made something different than what it had been.

At the same time that Marie was using content and conventions from the different genres of sportscast and video games, she was conscious of setting up her video in a way that used conventions from remixing videos of title cards, juxtaposing images and overlapping sound. For example, when a football player would intercept a pass, Marie inserted a video game sound as the awarded video game style points appeared over the player's head. She found ways to draw on the existing intertextual genre implications of the two genres with which she was working as she combined those into the genre of a remixed video—in which she followed the genre conventions fairly traditionally. While Marie's video was rough in places and not highly polished work, it was the control she displayed over the genre conventions and how she employed them for her argument that stood out in her work.

Alan's project and his discussion of his work also demonstrated his awareness and control over the connection between his knowledge of antecedent popular culture genres and his multimodal composition in the course.

Alan's research focused on anonymity online and how it influenced the behavior of individuals in online forums. For his multimodal project, he created a machinima using one of the *Call of Duty* games. His video used different levels of the game as metaphors for increasing levels of anonymity online. The user was led through each level by one of the characters in the game acting as a guide. On the first level there was no anonymity and no shooting. In the dialogue the character described it as "like *Cheers*, where everybody knows your name" and "This is where the academic types come to play. Pretty boring, right?" As anonymity increased, each level became increasingly chaotic until on the level where there is complete anonymity bullets whiz about and the guide said, "This is it boy, no rules here! You can't force rules on people who don't exist." As with many of the projects in both classes, there was irony and humor in this text. But the irony of seeing soldiers in a video game talking about anonymity and online behavior and referencing the behavior of "academic types" was not where this text ended. Instead, Alan used irony but combined it with a thoughtful metaphor. His metaphor of the online world as a metaphorical battlefield reinforced his argument that many people regard the Internet as a risky, dangerous place where anonymity leads to less civil and more combative behavior.

What's more important is how Alan used genre and thought about the genres he used. While he used a video game, he also thought about how his knowledge of film would shape his text. He said:

> The more we talked about genres in class, the more I thought about how many movies I watch. I watch *a lot* of movies, and play video games. I started looking again at the movies I like, like the classics, and how they set up shots. I knew more than I thought I did and that helped me block this out.

Alan's thinking about genre also led him to focus more on the moves he made as a writer while composing the multimodal text. He said, "I think the thing I really learned more than anything else is what editing really is. I mean know it by feeling it. I think about it now when I watch movies even." What is interesting in this statement is that Alan's thinking about genre while working on this project not only influenced his perceptions in the classroom, but also his literacy practices outside of school. If his understanding of genre and context became part of how he regarded texts in his daily life as well as the academy, his reading and writing would become more rhetorically subtle and critical on multiple levels. Alan was not alone among the students in mentioning that his perceptions of popular culture texts and genres had been influenced by the assignment. Often discussions of making classroom experiences relevant for the world outside of school focus on instrumental concerns, such as whether writing assignments will help students in their careers. While I'm not criticizing such approaches, I also believe there is room for work in writing courses that can help students become more creative and engaged with all the texts they encounter in their daily lives. For instance, the students in the second class demonstrated insights that extended beyond the specific assignment by not only thinking more carefully about the conventions of the popular culture genres they knew so well, but also working with material from those genres.

The students in the second class, overall, showed both a more critical and reflective approach to the influence of their antecedent genres, as well as a more flexible conception of genre in general. They were more willing to combine and bend genre conventions and to see genre as contextual and malleable. In this way they moved closer to what Bawarshi and Reiff (2010) termed genre *boundary crossers*, individuals who employ a broader range of genre strategies and make more flexible use of their knowledge of antecedent genres. They contrasted this with *boundary guarders*, individuals who regard genres as stable templates to be applied with less attention to context. Bawarshi and Reiff also argued, "Students may be more likely to transfer genre knowledge from one situation to another if they have an understanding of the flexible, dynamic nature of genres" (2010, p. 124). Just as intriguing is the way that students such as Marie drew from the more thoughtful approach to genre in her digital project to complicate her print research essay. Although both classes were given the print and multimodal assignments simultaneously, in the first semester of the course, students approached the digital project as somewhat detached from the print research essay. They understood that both were on the same subject, but the production of a digital, multimodal text was regarded as an add-on, not as a way of learning more about the subject that might influence the print project, even though I encouraged them to think about the projects in this way. In the class with more explicit discussion of genre, however, several of the students, such as Marie and Alan, incorporated their critical perspectives they learned while doing their digital projects in their print text. Marie commented that she added a section to her print analysis about the different ways of engaging with football video games and watching football on television after her multimodal project focused more on those concerns. Alan's print essay was influenced even more directly as he scrapped the first few pages he had written once he hit upon the video game metaphor that structured his machinima. He started again on the print essay, using the same metaphor as a framing device. The movement between the print and multimodal projects in the second class was intriguing beyond

questions of genre. For students such as Marie and Alan, the simultaneous print and multimodal projects encouraged a more recursive writing process that promoted the kind of reflection and revision that we often seek in writing courses. Moving between media and modes during the writing process is an idea that, to develop in detail, is beyond the scope of this article, but worth pursuing in future research.

6. Conclusion and implications

Rhetoric and composition is increasingly moving toward the understanding of what Charles Bazerman (1997) pointed out, "Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning" (p. 19). Accepting such a conception of genre, however, demands that that we understand our students' environments for learning through genre as not bounded by the walls of a classroom. It is not enough to acknowledge that students have encountered other genres before they come to our classes and that we must expose them to new genres. Instead we must realize, as Rick Carpenter (2009) noted, "When it comes to electronic texts, student know far more than they realize or can express, a fact that helps explain why college students are deemed rhetorically illiterate even when their texts suggest otherwise" (p. 146). It is our job, then, to help students come to a more critical and nuanced understanding of what they already know about genre and multimodal texts from their vast experience with popular culture. In doing so we can also help them situate this knowledge in the discourse and rhetorical context we want for our courses. Such work will also help students develop a more sophisticated sense of how to negotiate unfamiliar rhetorical contexts and understand how the genre conventions that may work in one text, for one audience, may need to be altered or adapted for the new purpose for which they are writing.

The research in these courses, as well as my anecdotal experience in teaching over a number of years, argues that students will draw on popular culture genres when turning to multimodal projects, whether we encourage them to or not. As I have argued in the past, pretending that we can excise students' knowledge of popular culture in writing courses is a futile cause, and, instead, we should be thinking about where it conflicts and where it connects with what we want to accomplish. To think of this in terms of genre scholarship is to agree with Bawarshi and Reiff (2010):

> Students bring with them their own genre histories and, based on the intellectual and institutional context of the writing class, teachers build into the classroom certain generic expectations. As a result, classroom genres are inescapable from power, social difference, and cultural factors. (p. 200)

It is essential for teachers, then, to not only think about the genres they want to teach students, but to also engage with students in terms of the genres they are already bringing to their writing. At this point we should think more explicitly about how we engage with popular culture genres when teaching students multimodal composing. The opportunity provided by digital media to produce multimodal texts means that students can now use their knowledge of popular culture genres not only in interpretive contexts, but also as a compositional resource as well. If we start with what students know from popular culture genres and engage them in reflecting on that knowledge, they will develop a more critical understanding of how and why these genre conventions work as they do in popular culture, as well as what to draw on—or avoid—in their compositions. Such an approach can result in multimodal writing that crosses or challenges genres as well as the critical knowledge of how genre shapes, and is shaped by, writing in context.

Finally, it is instructive to note how many students in the second semester of the course, like Alan, talked of how their more sophisticated knowledge of genre would affect their reading and writing outside the classroom, including their engagement with popular culture. For a long time there has been a lot of discussion in literacy and writing education about using popular culture as a *bridge* to the genres and forms more valued—and more certain to be assessed—in the classroom. Yet, it's clear in this metaphor that this is conceived of as a one-way bridge. Sure, we can start with the mindless and fun pop culture stuff, but then we cross that glorious bridge to the golden fields of *academic* texts and critical thinking. The problem with this model is the conception of the bridge between out-of-school literacy and in-school practices is that it is perceived as only moving in a single direction. Rather than assuming that the only learning worth happening in school takes place when the base influences encountered outside the classroom are turned into the gold of academic literacy and texts, we should instead approach all of the literacy practices, in the classroom and out, as connected. We should engage students in ways of thinking about audience, detail, style, emotion, analysis, in any mode of reading and writing, as important ideas to consider regardless of the text and the context. Rather than approach popular culture as something to be left on one side of the bridge as students move on to more "important" work on the other side of the bridge, we should set our goals to help students understand that the

literacy and rhetorical practices we teach them will bring them knowledge and pleasure in all the parts of their lives. Whether what students read on their own is for work or for pleasure, providing them with a more nuanced and critical understanding of how texts are created and genres work is a worthwhile goal for our teaching. Just as we have begun to get beyond perceiving popular culture as having no place in the classroom, we can embrace this work as a worthwhile goal that enables students—whether for critique or for pleasure—to read and write film, video, television, games, and other out-of-school texts more critically and creatively.

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