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Remix, Play, and Remediation: Undertheorized Composing Practices

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Culture is remix ... remix is how we as humans live.— *Lessig, "Remix Culture"*

We live in "a world that is both instantaneous and cumulative, in which all things (consumer goods and cultural products included) accumulate and crumple up endlessly. Everything ends up as odds and ends and debris to be glued back together, and thus begin anew."— *Boisvert*

Today is Thursday, June 5, 2008, and today's context is this:

- Around 11:00 P.M. EST on September 5, 2007, the English edition of Wikinews reached 10,000 news articles. As of 11:51 A.M. EST on June 5, 2008, there are almost 2.4 million articles included in the English-language area of Wikipedia.
- More than 150,000 new users are signing up daily on Facebook.com, opened to public user accounts in September 2007; Tom (the creator and Friend-in-Chief on MySpace) has 234,948,570 friends on MySpace—up from 195,407,675 less than nine months prior, meaning that Tom has made almost 39 million friends in less than thirty days. Friendster, launched in 2002, is considered near-defunct.
- As of 12:02 P.M. EST on June 5, 5,214 uploads had occurred in the last sixty seconds on Flickr; 71,248 things were tagged with "jump," 558,832 things were tagged with "urban," and 2.7 million things had been geotagged in the past 5 days.
- Blizzard Entertainment has launched a 2008 *World of Warcraft* Arena Tournament, and invited interested players to post feedback and strate-

gies in tournament forums, which, as of 2:34 P.M. EST, hosted more than 1200 posts, which have been viewed more than 1.4 million times.
- As of 12:04 P.M. EST on YouTube, 309,686 users had viewed the 7-day-old video for Weezer's song "Pork & Beans," which features cameos and references to a range of Internet-famous work (e.g., "Shoes"; "Chocolate Rain," which itself had 23,982,338 views as of June 5, 2008; and the Diet Coke and Mentos experiments); 2,185 users had rated the video, and more than 1,600 had commented on the video.

These bits and bytes do not necessarily speak for themselves, but we do see them as compelling evidence of the ways in which writers and composers are remixing, rewriting, rescripting, and redelivering work in digital spaces. Importantly, these pieces show us, also, how people are remixing and composing across media differentials. Weezer, for instance, a top-selling, major-label-signed band, is drawing from what we might have in the past labeled "consumer-produced" media, which, in the recent past, would not have had a global audience, and perhaps would not have lived beyond the producer's video camera. Another popular YouTube video (not mentioned in the list above), Condilicious!, appropriates news footage, White House stills, and the identity of Condoleezza Rice, all set to the beat and music of Fergie's "Fergilicious." These bits and bytes remind us that the lines between media consumption and media production are porous in digital spaces; they illustrate, compellingly, today's digital media landscape, and we thus draw on them as departure points for discussing digital composing processes.

What Is Digital Composing? What Is Remix?

That's how creativity happens. Artists collaborate over space and time, even if they lived centuries and continents apart. Profound creativity requires maximum exposure to others' works and liberal freedoms to reuse and reshape others' material.— *Vaidhynathan*

Writing happens across multiple modes of meaning-making. Computers and robust networks allow writers to choreograph audio, video, other visual elements, text, and more. Computers and robust networks allow writers to collaborate and co-author across space, time, and context. Computers and robust networks allow us to take the work of others, mix it, mash it, remix it, and send it further on down the digital line. This is all new. And its newness is profoundly important. Admittedly, some have been mixing media for years to create advertisements, movies, and CDs, for instance, but the range of access to these technologies is now accessible in ways we haven't seen before. Twenty years ago, the computer mouse was a clunky oddity. Eighteen years

ago, in 1991, the web was relatively new, existing on only a few computers at a particle physics laboratory. Nine years ago, in 1999, the initial promises of web-based consumerism dissolved, and we faced a micro-depression created by withering venture capital and the collapse of many web-based businesses. Eight years ago, in 2000, the original version of iMovie was released. Less than three years ago, in February 2005, three developers created YouTube.

Many digital spaces propel us past the stereotypical image of the single author producing work in isolation, delivered in one-way fashion, to where we now have the possibilities for more distributed, shared views of authorship — think of spaces like Wikipedia, for instance, where work and authorial agency is attributed often in diverse, diffuse ways. Or spaces like those facilitated and supported by Creative Commons, where authors and artists can determine the ways in which they want to assert control over their work — and, in fact, rather than asserting control, most invite use, participation, and co-production. Remixing the words, images, and audio of others is not only fair game, but, in fact, commonplace, expected, and *valued* — it is part of the heart and fabric of the web. And it is, we would argue, a dominant composing paradigm in digital space. Ownership is framed less by The Author and authorial claim and more by fair uses, open sharing, and community expectations and related motivations for writing — think of Blogger, LiveJournal, Facebook, or MySpace and the conventions that have been cultivated among these communities of writers. Typically, distribution is multi-point, nonlinear, rhizomatic, and often very interactive. In addition, the stories we tell throughout this chapter all contribute to how we are resituating notions of authorship, authority, ownership, and distribution. In the sections that follow, we present three stories that reflect more robust ways of thinking about writing in digital spaces, remixing in networked contexts, and resituating the author in a digital world. Three arguments unfold across the stories we tell:

1. Play and remix are crucial digital composing practices, yet are generally understudied and undertheorized.

2. "New media" doesn't really exist, but we can identify a post-genre blurring and mashing of media and genres.

3. Consumption and analysis alone aren't enough to theorize play, remix, and new media — to address the ways in which writing practices shift in digital realms, we have to move toward production and reflection.

Play as Learning (Sue)

Although we often revise when we write, I posit that revising through play is a more dynamic way for us to think of (and tackle) processes of revi-

sion. There is not much scholarship available (Costanzo, Sloan) on the notion of revision as play. By thinking of revision as play, I've managed to revise one piece into five formats, which serve (at least) that many different audiences: *Grand Theft Audio*, a Microsoft PowerPoint slideshow I wrote as a graduate student in fall 2006. *Grand Theft Audio* has morphed (not all by itself) into several different genres. It isn't a typical PowerPoint — it's more of a mini-movie, a multi-modal argument on copyright and Fair Use. It was fun to write, but it was, at times, a pain to craft. It's now a YouTube video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hN-IzWY3_E), the basis of an academic journal article, the foundation of an online conference keynote address, and a hyperlinked speech.

The original slideshow required approximately one hundred production hours. The many remixes of the original piece reflect another fifty hours for each of them. Some teachers and scholars assume that multimedia composing is easier or quicker than writing an alphabetic essay, but I disagree. I spent far more hours producing this slideshow than I would have typing up the same argument in the traditional academic essay format (in Times New Roman, 12 pt, double-spaced text). Because crafting the slideshow felt like play, I invested more time and more energy, and ended up with a product that is more compelling, and even fun, than an academic essay could ever be.

The original slideshow is a mixture of text, sound, images, and color that weaves together an informative report, U.S. intellectual property laws, a range of policies, popular culture, and metal music. This massive slideshow (ninety-nine slides) presents a blurring of production tools, each of which I had to *play with* in order to manipulate my argument into the mini-movie. It has a rich, loud soundtrack, with colorful logos and photos and a corresponding textual argument. During the one-hundred hours spent producing this mere ten-minute video, I was jumping across at least five different software applications, the web (for images and font faces), and iTunes (for the music). As I leapt from application to application, I blurred the lines between them. As I toggled across multiple modalities, I blurred the lines between what text can say, what images can show, and what music can convey. This playing taught me to push the boundaries of PowerPoint.

The multiple and layered messages in the movie speak to audiences in several ways: Although *Grand Theft Audio* helps viewers understand the complexities of copyright and Fair Use, it also demonstrates multimedia production concepts, including attention to graphic content, use of color, arrangement of screen space, overall layout, and font choice. I played with the text in the slideshow so that I'd have very little text on each screen; with the loud music in the background, the text had to stand out above the background noise. Piracy is a "dark" subject, so I played with the colors so they would

reinforce the dark side of piracy. I played with words. I played with logos. I played with the timing. And then I played with what I'd already played with. I remixed my own work; I moved pieces; I mashed parts. I cut. I pasted. I merged. I morphed.

In the process of this playing, I hoped to export *GTA* to a YouTube-friendly format; I opened Windows Movie Maker and tried to import *Grand Theft Audio*. The ninety-nine slides crashed Movie Maker. Willing to play a bit longer, and wanting to push (back) at Movie Maker, I dragged each slide, individually, into Movie Maker and then recreated all of the transitions. These hours didn't feel much like play, and it changed the feel of the movie, but a .wmv file *will* load onto YouTube. Play (coupled with patience) taught me Movie Maker.

A few months later, I remixed *Grand Theft Audio* (yet again) into a textual piece. I wrote a discussion of the process of making *GTA* and transformed it into a manuscript for publication in a special issue of *Computers and Composition* on the subject of Media Convergence. Play got me published!

Other instructors have asked that I present *GTA* in their classrooms. So, to situate the movie for their students, I wrote a hyperlinked introduction (http://www.wordslingingwoman.com/GTAscript.pdf) that gives students context for the arguments the slideshow presents, discusses some of the graphic design techniques, and explains remix as a concept. When I guest lecture, I give an oral presentation to situate the movie, then I share a link with students so they can dig deeper into the myriad of composing practices I call *Grand Theft Audio*. My playing now teaches students.

Play as/and Genre Bending (Dundee)

Those of us in rhetoric and composition interested in digital spaces, networked writing, distributed authorship, and play as inquiry want to teach students how to play with ideas, to consider research as a process of inquiry, and to make deliberate, rhetorical choices about forms, and styles. Too often, though, we have trouble doing this in our *own* work. Too often, our "choices" are something closer to habit. What I describe next is a project that set my habits off balance, and made me play — and learn, and rethink genre — long after I thought I had much left to learn about academic writing.

Before I began graduate study, I spent a brief period in a Mayan village in Guatemala as a volunteer teacher. Later, as part of my graduate work, I was assigned a literature review project for one of my courses. When I began, I had no idea that my choice and the specific genre of the literature review

would ultimately lead so far away from the boundaries of the familiar (white pages; black text set at 12 pt; one-inch margins; etc.). Almost immediately, I began to ask myself: Why? Why do we choose to write in the genres and attendant forms we do, even when they don't match our purposes? It seems often our choices are based on the fact that there *are* established modes and genres — our choices are then simply habits that carry with them an implicit stamp of societal, disciplinary, and community approval. But sometimes, these choices work against us.

Take, for example, the case of Rigoberta Menchú — a Mayan woman who told the stories of violence against her people to anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. The tapes eventually wound up being published in the form of a testimonio, *I, Rigoberta Menchú.* What would be the texture of the testimonio if it had been delivered via the original audiotapes? Or sketches? Or in some other mode or genre entirely than the print text? I began to wonder what this meant for my review of literature. Was I privileging something inadvertently, at the cost of something else, *simply by choosing this form?*

Ellen Cushman and Terese Monberg explain that "as composition scholars wrestle with ... questions of representation and authority, we are also experimenting with the conventional forms in which we (re)present our data and our interpretations" (168). Why shouldn't testimonio be (re)presented with cinematographic cues, especially considering Gunther Kress has said that "depiction is a better means of dealing with much in the world than writing or speech could be" and "the next generation of children actually [might be] more attuned to 'truth' through the specificity of depiction rather than the vagueness of the word" (Fortune 50) — why don't we *depict* at least as often as we *write*, especially in testimonio?

For my literature review, I wound up creating a web site (http://www.msu.edu/~lackeydu/guatemala) with the largest section devoted to a hypertextual political timeline, in which I attempted to use image, sound, and hyperlinked dissonant evidence to show the continuing and dividing nature of what happened in Guatemala (an idea gleaned from teaching Sean Williams' hypertext argument assignment). My web project is still essentially a review of literature and an information clearing house, but one approached aurally, visually, and emotionally. It is a space through which I demand much of the reader. I'm not doing, here, *all* the work of making sense for the reader, but providing instead an immersive experience, suggesting arguments through media items, through linking, and through some alphabetic text of my own. Almost all the images are links inviting readers to deeper inquiry. This site, then, is an exploration of a topic, but also a rhetorical exploration of and playing with genre — a mix of rhetorical analyses, travel and research notebook entries, and (visual) annotations that allowed me a space to learn, but also a

place to consider the ways in which academics explore (or colonize), listen (or appropriate), or speak with (or for) the topics we study.

Play as Production (Andréa)

The alarm on my cell phone goes off. It's 8:15 A.M. I didn't even go to bed until 2:30 A.M., but this is not uncommon. Still I rise. I feed the cat, start the coffee, plug in the cell phone to charge, and turn on the computer. My day has begun. While drinking the first of many cups of the day's coffee, I launch my web browser with its default three tabs — for Gmail and two other portal pages I use to check headlines, oil prices, weather, and of course, my horoscope. I start one of my instant messaging programs and say good morning to various people. I greet others on Google Talk, resident in my Gmail tab. I open a fourth tab in my web browser and log into Facebook, skimming newsfeeds and status messages. I compulsively return pokes and respond to invitations and comments. I go back to Gmail and click on the calendar link, opening a fifth tab, to see what my schedule is for the day. I think about the projects I'm working on — two manuscripts; my dissertation; a guidebook project for teaching assistants at Michigan State University, for which I am composing the section on teaching with technology; and several other projects. I open my word-processing software along with six different documents related to this very chapter while I continue sending instant messages back and forth to five different people. I return to Gmail to check on the three email accounts I access via Gmail; a new message has just arrived from the new section editors of *Kairos*, requesting verification that the current assistant editors (like me) wish to continue editing for the section. I reply in the affirmative. This reminds me that my portfolio site needs to be updated, so I launch an HTML editing and web development application and open the separate web page files and the CSS code for my website. I open a graphic-design program to play with an image I'm working on for the website, and then go back to the word-processing documents to re-read the proposal for this chapter. I toggle to my web browser and compulsively check each tab for new items, scanning RSS feeds as they periodically pop up to indicate updates on pages I've subscribed to. I open another email application and check mail on the six other email addresses through which I subscribe to at least a dozen different email lists, all of them professional or academic. I quickly scan subject lines, stopping to read only one or two of the messages. I open *World of Warcraft* to log on to my bank 'toon to check auctions. W00t! Most of my auctions have sold, and I just made 437 gold.

This hybrid of work and play — this mashing of technologies and gen-

res, of socializing and writing, of multitasking and multimedia — is precisely the difference in composing practices we're talking about in this chapter. Composing in this digital landscape is a vastly different practice than the romanticized concept of the lone writer sequestered from the world's "intrusions" as s/he composes. I rarely, if ever, compose alone — my work, like my life, is networked and shared. Friends, colleagues, and people I've only ever known online through places like Second Life or *World of Warcraft* are all part of my composing process and spaces. In fact, it's not uncommon to meet with my co-editor in *World of Warcraft* to discuss our book in progress.

A crucial aspect of *play as production* is the social aspect of composing in these digital spaces and the relationship to multitasking that such a composing environment engages. The rich graphical interface of *World of Warcraft*, for instance, consists of many complicated layers of visual, textual, and audio elements that players seamlessly toggle between and across to manipulate their characters and interact with other players simultaneously. Such shifts between modes and across interfaces of in-game chat, character actions, and coordinated activities with other players is quite similar to the toggling with which I opened this section, describing my movement between computer applications, asynchronous communication, simultaneous conversations, textual production, and visual composing. While some research suggests that such toggling or multitasking may decrease student abilities to focus attention (Wallis), toggling as I described in my opening paragraphs is rapidly becoming normalized behavior. For members of the digital generations, it *is* the way to focus.

Equally as important in *play as production* is what it can produce. The "Leeroy Jenkins!" video is an apt illustration of *play as production* in these new composing practices and spaces. The short (just under 3 minutes) video packs in a rich visual argument employing humor, satire, rhetorical appeals, and archetypes. The video creators employ all the elements of a good academic argument, including an introduction that hooks the audience, an issue or problem for discussion, evidence to support the various assertions, and a satisfying conclusion that leaves the audience with a call to action. The video composers undoubtedly know their audience — other players of *World of Warcraft*, approximately the same age as themselves — and reveal this attention to audience through the in-game lingo they use and the tactics they discuss. The composers also take full advantage of the ethos provided through oratory and the timing of the event. Additionally, the purpose (to have fun and/or to promote the guild) is accomplished through the example of teamwork and humor. As Celia Pearce argues in her ethnographic research on productive game play, "the boundaries between play and production, between work and leisure, and between media consumption and media production are increasingly blurring"

(18). This is clearly the case for the composers of the "Leeroy Jenkins!" video, who use game play to create a rhetorically savvy and technologically sophisticated visual argument, and who show attention to both genre and their audience through appeals to ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos.

When we see students in class listening to iPods, instant messaging their friends, and updating their status messages in social networking spaces while they take notes or work on class projects, there is an implicit assumption that students are simply not paying attention. However, when we examine the way composing processes — perhaps especially for the digital generations — occur seamlessly in and across networks, media, and genres, we should question this assumption. As we argued earlier in this chapter, writing today means weaving text, images, sound, and video while working within and across multiple media, often for delivery within and across digital spaces. Writing in the digital landscapes in which students live and work means engaging collaboration and cooperation for invention and composition, and it means that what looks like play likely belies the rhetorically rich and complex processes at work. Play *is* production.

Some Conclusions and Directions

According to Lawrence Lessig, remix culture is a culture of derivative works, a culture where everything and anything is up for grabs — to change, to integrate, to mix, and to mash. Certainly, the ability to do so has been accelerated by the personal computer and by digital networks, which allow us to more easily share, copy, download, and mix media. Bernard Schütze's work runs parallel with Lessig's characteristics of remix culture, but Schütze is more politically fervent in his declarations that remix culture "upholds the remix as an open challenge to a culture predicated on exclusive ownership, authorship, and controlled distribution." Schütze contextualizes remix culture as existing in a space where authority, ownership, and originality have been displaced: The Internet, where "the heap has reached the highest critical mass, permitting remix practices to Spread and Disseminate on a planetary scale. With its free-floating file sharing, splicing and sampling, and instant distribution of digital media, the Web has become an ideal ground for remix practices of all sorts." Worth1000 (www.worth1000.com), a daily image manipulation contest and gallery site, is an example of such a space of remix practices. Copying and imitating are common and effective strategies for learning, creating, and composing. They are valued methods of meaning-making. Important to the value of copying, however, is transformative value — the making of something new. This might come in the form of delivering a text into a new context; collecting the text with other texts to make a new

compilation; adding additional text; taking a new stance toward the existing text; parodying the existing text; transforming an existing image to send a new meaning; etc.

Understanding writing-as-remix requires dramatically different approaches to authorship and ownership of texts — approaches that recognize and call attention to multiply-authored pieces, work that is written "collaboratively" with other artists and writers (living or dead, in physical proximity or across the globe), and work where ownership is shared across networks (of people and machines) and servers.

Play and remix are crucial digital composing practices, but these practices are generally understudied and undertheorized. We hope, through the situating discussion we've offered and the stories we've told, to have illustrated the ways in which play and remix are not just composing practices, but robust activities crucial to the lives we live as academics, students, citizens, and more. Remix happens; remix is a composing paradigm across digital networks and in virtual spaces. Play happens; play is a composing paradigm across digital networks and in virtual spaces. We do, however, need to be attentive to and extend the work of folks like Albert Rouzie and Lev Vygotsky, who help us understand play in innovative ways. Although Vygotsky is most known for his work in child development, subsequent research and the very essence of writing pedagogy situates writing as a space for learning and growing intellectually. Thus, many of the arguments Vygotsky posited regarding child development may also be said for writing development. Specifically, then, we should heed his advice to not "disregard the [writer's] needs — understood in the broadest sense to include everything that is a motive for action" — especially play (*Mind* 92). Vygotsky tells us that "play [is] a cognitive process" through which we find purpose and that, "superficially, play bears little resemblance to what it [can lead us] to" ("Play"). When we play — through our digital networks, in our virtual spaces, with our writing — we learn, we produce, we bend — we grow.

Each of us has faced a colleague, a parent, an administrator, or a student who has asked "what does *this* have to do with writing?" This question reminds us of the long-instilled habits of academe, and how we need to continually negotiate and renegotiate those habits. Composing in digital spaces, and writing framed by play and remix, need not be divorced from what we hold true as writing teachers. All of the elements of "good" composing practices carry into digital spaces. Further, we would argue that multimediated composing practices allow for a greater understanding of rhetorical practices than does work in traditional alphabetic modes alone. Writers wrestle with audio, with video, with still images, and with myriad other compositional elements, all requiring deep attention to rhetorical concerns.

We want to close with a few suggestions — ways in which we can integrate and value play in the writing classroom, and ways we can rethink genres and the work genres do, especially in digital contexts:

- Rework existing assignments to allow for and encourage play — our traditional beliefs about writing, reading, and learning are rich and flexible enough to migrate to different places. Digital movies have introductions. Web sites require details, description, and explanation. Blog entries require some sort of concluding statement or closure.

- Be patient. Be aware. Foster investment, and recognize investment. To integrate play, we must be willing to play, and playing — especially in digital spaces — takes time.

- Encourage media flexibility and transmediation. Encourage students to take genres and documents and move them into different media. Shifting asks for and requires play, and deeply analyzing both genres and the work genres do, and revision and the work revision does.

Challenging students to interrogate genres and forms, with attention to rhetorical concerns, and to make choices based on audience and purpose — rather than on our institutional habits or expectations — provides them with a rhetorical awareness that should equip them to think their way through any writing situation they may encounter. These lessons, however, require that we encourage students to think outside the box and beyond the default word-processing document. These lessons require us to be willing to do so ourselves, and to help develop the theories that explain how and why such works are created, what purposes they serve, and how working in more thoughtful, if unexpected, forms might be usefully taught and assessed in a writing curricula.

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