

Writing of the Twenty-First Century

In order to adequately define, explore, and utilize writing of the twenty-first century, it is necessary to define the new media of the twenty-first century. New media, by nature of the term, is associated with new experiences— new ways of representation, new relationships between consumers and objects, identity and community, the organic body with the technological media; and new patterns of organization and production (Lister et al. 12). The tools of new media—the World Wide Web, the Internet, etc—emphasize the process of globalization, decentralizing insular or singular entities in favor of international, global networks of information (Lister et al. 10).

Any writing of the twenty-first century must naturally embrace the media of the twenty-first century, which allows for a high level of interactivity, hypertextual and intertextual reading, automation, and different potential infinite versions of a text (Manovich 32-45). Interactivity has three main iterations:

- **Conceptualization:** The reader has contact with other people’s conceptualizations. This involves interaction between the reader’s “pre-existing framework of understanding and a new exposition” (Jawah 10).
- **Construction:** “The application and testing of new conceptualizations...” This involves the building of the reader’s own “framework of understanding” (Jawah 10).
- **Dialogue:** The “creation and testing of new conceptualizations during conversation with both tutors and fellow learners” (Jawah 10).

Conceptualization has been a component of writing and reading long before the twenty-first century. Some scholars believe that “our experience of language cannot be, is never, other than the experience of [other] texts” (Kress 6). We read through our personal, cultural/societal, and moral codes; we write (or construct), whether consciously or unconsciously, within not only those codes but the context of everything we have ever read. Dialogue occurs when we share our work with others. Writing of the twenty-first century breaks down the walls between these three iterations of interactivity and blends them together. Conceptualization can occur simultaneously with construction, while real-time dialogue can affect both as they happen.

Perhaps the earliest examples of twenty-first century textual interactivity are mad libs, or in a more formal presentation, the “Choose-Your-Own-Adventure” books of the 1980s-1990s. Mad libs allow a reader to input words of their own choosing at predetermined locations within an already constructed text. Depending on what words the reader chooses, the text can take on new, different, but ultimately infinite meanings, ranging from the nonsensical to the reverse. “Choose-Your-Own-Adventure” books elevate this concept to a more refined level. A few pages into the story (told in a second-person perspective), the reader is asked to make a decision related to the character’s (the reader’s) actions. Whichever decision the reader makes determines what page the reader should turn to next. For example: To try and scale the mountain, turn to page 20. To try and find another way to your

destination, turn to page 45. Although each choice and its consequences are predetermined, the reader plays a significant role in the ultimate outcome of the story. Some scholars even argue that this kind of first-hand control over a character's decisions ups the empathic factor of a text through making the reader/player responsible for the actions of a character, resulting in pride when the action is honorable and guilt when it is not (Rolls 103). Later iterations of this idea developed along with technology, resulting in computer games like *Storybook Weaver*, *Opening Night*, and Steven Spielberg's *Director's Chair*, in which players create or help to create their own stories with visual and audio components.

One "flaw" suggested of interactive texts like mad libs, "Choose-Your-Own-Adventure" books, and computer games is that these texts do not allow for "true" interactivity, since all the reader's options have actually been created and chosen for them by another person. Steven Spielberg's *Director's Chair*, for example, was panned by critics because it limited the player to the pre-filmed and pre-determined storyline of a stolen jewel. Though the player could decide who stole the jewel and the fates of all involved, the way each scene was acted, filmed, and scripted was pre-determined, and the player can only choose between a number of fixed endings. In this instance, it can be argued that the reader is merely following the web of possibilities already decided by the original writer. This argument supposes that a reader or writer working with an already-written text is immediately robbed of any control over the story that text is trying to tell. Fan fiction renders this argument wholly irrelevant, as the genre is built upon (and rightly cannot exist without) prewritten/created texts. Fan fiction can be defined as "writing, whether official or unofficial, paid or unpaid, which makes use of an accepted canon of characters, settings and plots generated by another writer or writers" (Pugh 25). Fan fiction might conceivably involve Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy having a spat, Captain Kirk and Spock investigating a new planet, or Luke Skywalker tending the moisture farm on Tatooine. Fan fiction is, by nature, intertextual, and is actually the reading of two texts at once—the new fan fiction, and the original source material (Derecho 73). To understand the meaning and context of the new fan fiction, a reader is compelled to remember the meaning and context of the original fiction from which the new story is drawn. To properly understand and appreciate a work of fan fiction requires previous (and sometimes thorough) knowledge of the fan fiction's source material. Thus, both writers and readers of fan fiction must interact with an original, pre-existing text in order for their newly constructed conceptualization to effectively communicate its message.

In translating these concepts of interactivity to newer media, such as the film, web page, podcast, computer game, etc., the text begins to take on new aspects and foundations that may not have existed in print. For example, Morris and Swiss write, "when we encounter [a] work directly, we are either at the website or in the book. In between these two navigational sites is another kind of space-time produced by their conjunction" (205). In translating an originally written work into a web page, there is always some internal comparison between the two formats (much like comparing a book with a film adaptation). At times, messages are lost or created anew in translation. Even seemingly simple changes, such as placing text in bullet points rather than in sentences within a paragraph can change the deeper meaning of a text, placing emphasis on certain points while deemphasizing others (Kress 16). In addition, writing presented on a computer—whether through the internet or a game or other means—is not only interpreted by a reader through his or her own cultural/societal codes, but

also through the technical, algorithmic codes needed for the computer to “read” the story. Often, the requirements of this secondary, technical code have an effect on the overall story, whether that effect is more possibilities or more limitations. Interactions begin to occur not only between the reader the writer or the reader and the text, but also between the reader/writer and the medium.

For example, in crafting my own adventure for the computer game *Neverwinter Nights*, I found that it was not enough to simply write out dialogue, assign it to a speaker, and expect conversation to occur in order/make sense. In order to create a coherent, progressive conversation, I was required to build “nesting” dialogue, starting with an initiation/greeting from the player/non-playable character (NPC), a response, and then a selection of responses for the player to choose from. If the player had finished talking to a character and later decided to talk to him again, the same conversation would occur unless I assigned “scripts” to the last line of their initial conversation. Scripts tell the program if a conversation has occurred or not. If it has, the computer then instructs the character to begin a new, different conversation that I had written to occur later in the story. In this instance, the technical codes of the program limited the format/construction of my story, but allowed for multiple conversation responses and outcomes.

New media, interactivity, and writing of the twenty-first century need not eliminate human interaction in favor of solitary interaction with preexisting text or new technologies, however. New media instead allows for more accessible and thus more easily created communities in which readers and writers can share and construct new conceptualizations through dialogue. Blogs (and their emerging audio/visual counterparts) allow just about anyone with access to a computer and the internet to instantly publish their writing and share it with others. The appeal of blogs goes beyond their ease of usage; they mix the pleasure of journaling with the sharing of information, and allow writers to create new personas and worlds in which they may develop an identity (Penrod 6, 13). Blogging is especially empowering to the marginalized, who can draw international and often media attention to their plight right from their own homes. The genre is malleable, with as-of-yet no fixed rules or formats, freeing writers to blog in whatever way seems most natural and comfortable to them.

In addition, instead of just a single author blogging about their personal thoughts, online communities can be formed centered around popular issues, hobbies, or properties, allowing many writers to come together and share their thoughts and reactions to each other. Online forums and databases are managed by a team of individuals and utilized by countless more, allowing far more interaction and exchange than other media. For example, “The Agony Booth” is a website devoted to lampooning and deriding bad movies with screen-captioned reviews. At the conclusion of each review, readers are invited to add their own commentary in the forums on the film or the review itself. The site is maintained, edited, and updated by a considerable number of people, and has recently begun accepting reader submissions of reviews. Visit <http://www.agonybooth.com/> to learn more.

Writing of the twenty-first century allows more than free speech and mere communal discussion and interpretation of texts, however. The ease of communication over the internet makes collaborative writing easier than ever, and it can even be created/edited in real time, thanks to the plethora of free blogs, journals, forums, web space, and other posting utilities available online.

Collaborative writing can occur in many formats; it may simply involve two writers trading responses/commentary/chapters through email, or it can involve many individuals working together to tell a story through online role-play. In online role-play, a writer assumes the identity of one or more characters, while another writer assumes the identity of others. The writers take turns posting snippets of their character's actions/dialogue in reaction to each other. For example:

PLAYER ONE POSTS: Rogue found Revan sitting in the communications room, completely lost in thought. Although she was reluctant to break the woman from her thoughts, she quietly knocked on the door. "Sorry, am I disturbing you?"

PLAYER TWO POSTS: Revan looked up to see Rogue standing reluctantly in the doorway. "No, not at all." She tried to give the woman a smile, although her heart wasn't really in it. "Come on in."

PLAYER ONE POSTS: "Thank you," Rogue replied quietly, noticing Revan's forced smile. She entered the small room, and sat down in one of the chairs. She watched Revan fidgeting for a few seconds. "Are you alright?" Rogue asked, knowing she was not likely to get an answer.¹

This kind of collaborative role-playing is most commonly associated with fan fiction, as fans of a particular cast of characters each take on the role of their favored character and act/write out additional adventures for the cast.

Some scholars argue that collaborative writing in actuality results in a text readable only to those involved: "Writing exists only as the contact among people who realize a shared consciousness within the sustained event of that writing" (Taylor and Ward 55). While this may be seen as a negative consequence of collaborative writing, it also fosters a sense of community between the writers involved. This may account for the recent explosion of Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), such as World of Warcraft or Guild Wars. These games take collaborative storytelling to new levels as players design a look, identity, and backstory for their character, and then send that character out to battle with/against and interact with other players all over the world. Alternatives to the fantasy and science fiction genres also exist in games such as Second Life and the Sims Online, where the computerized identities of players are more true-to-life, but no less digital or interactive.

Writing of the twenty-first century is, in many ways, no different than any other century. At its core, its purpose remains simple: to tell a story as effectively and clearly as possible. The means through which to effectively share that story have and are changing rapidly, making writing of the twenty-first century far different physically than ever before. Interactivity allows for constantly changing and revitalizing texts, and a deeper connection between writer and reader than ever before. Roles become blurred; the author can simultaneously exist as the creator and the consumer. The communicative ease of the internet allows for collaborative writing and editing on a level never before possible. Technology can be both a help and a hindrance: Storytelling in these mediums often provides simplification of huge

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<http://www.kotorfanmedia.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=733&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=90>

subjects; instead of large, long blocks of text, readers receive information through images, audio, and other visual components, which are often processed more quickly (Hocks and Kendrick 203). Additionally, presentation through these mediums is closer to real-world experience (i.e., highly visual), making it more likely that readers will gravitate towards them (Hocks and Kendrick 202). It is important to note, however, that “no medium or technique of production can in itself give the [artist] the inspiration or imagination to produce works of art” (Morris and Swiss 143). Whatever the medium or the benefits/limitations it presents, a story must be good in order to succeed.

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