



Crafting Designs: An Archaeology of “Craft” as God Term

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Abstract

Small-batch, artisan-made, handmade, bespoke—this article examines the use of “craft” as a stabilizing design god term during periods of technological flux. Using Foucauldian archaeology, I survey three common synecdoches of craft: craft as crafting, craft as product, and craft as set of rights. In doing so, I reveal a system of contradictions, determinisms, and romanticisms circulating around the logic of craft as technological *good*. But I also suggest that by reviewing a community’s uniquely nostalgic definitions of craft, designers might uncover which technological traditions, values, and goals users desire to take from past designs into the future. By understanding craft as a local process, a cross-culturally variable logic, and a product that hails active consumers, this essay ultimately argues that designers and writers alike might come to create more user-centered and emancipatory compositions. © 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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Deep in the high-tech hearts of many American workplaces, among looming server stacks, glowing monitors, and cubicles of data designers, increasingly one hears a metallic clicking. But as one’s eyes pan to the source of this noise, instead of keyboards weaving a binary of ones and zeros, one finds knitting needles weaving knits and purls. Whether it’s knitting, cross stitch, woodwork, or origami, more and more digital composers are turning to craft, for handicraft seems to hold a godly power to re-embodiment the digital, produce calculable products, and connect designers to their technological roots in ways digital modes of composition do not. At its 2013 retreat, for instance, the app developer Heroku had its employees attend *high-tech* workshops but also practice *low-tech* origami, quilting, and bookbinding (Mitroff, 2013). The aim of such craft, explained Heroku COO Oren Teich, was:

Trying to make developers’ lives better. . . software development as a craft. . . If you’re just working with what you know, you have a very narrow view of the world, but if you can look at origami or print making, you’re going to be a better programmer. (Mitroff)

Of course, Teich isn’t alone in his faith. Craft, “the application of skill and material-based knowledge to relatively small-scale production,” (Adamson, 2010, p. 2) has been a deterministic technological “god term” since at least the industrial revolution. In *Capital Vol. 1*, for instance, Karl Marx (1887) famously traced the epochs of capitalism from individual craft, through local guilds, to the deskilling of the factory. More recently,

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philosopher Andrew Feenberg (2010) noted that small-scale crafts “serve and express their culture” where large-scale manufacture replaces it, “disrupting social institutions and destabilizing cultural life” (p. 183). Thus, craft is prescribed as a dialectical panacea to all that technology engineers, composers, and consumers have found wrong with design: small-scale craft vs. mass production, skilled craft vs. mechanization, eco-craft vs. pollution, and on and on.

1. Three synecdoches of craft

The goal of this essay is to ask in what ways these dichotomies are valid and flawed, what the rhetorical aims of such binaries are, and what designers and compositionists might learn by viewing technological, textual, and workplace design under a more complex lens of craft. Thus, our guiding questions: Why, in periods of technological flux (from industrial, to nuclear, to digital revolutions), have designers so often turned to craft? And how do such appeals vary, clash, disappear, and resurface as ideals of technological *good*? To explore these queries, we’ll progress by Foucauldian archaeology, excavating “the ordering grid that supports the concept” (Porter, 1992, p. 8), the edifices of power and knowledge under three typical craft synecdoches:

1. *Craft as crafting*: the view that the process of making is just as (or more) important than the product. Seen under recent marketing terms like “artisan-made,” this approach values skill and technique over mechanistic production.
2. *Craft as product*: the view that products made using a craft process carry a Benjaminian “aura” of originality that individuates the consumer, worships tradition through consumption, meshes with local values, and bonds user and producer.
3. *Craft as a set of rights*: the view that craft is a set of rights that offsets the alienation of workers from the products of their labor, stresses the skill of the worker, and develops workers as unique individuals who have a right to gratification and freedom in their jobs.

To populate this scaffolding, I coalesce three sets of sources that commonly summon craft but don’t often converse with one another. First, I cite craft and design theorists, from Marx to biographers of French chocolate. This group of historians, philosophers, and designers help us get a chronological foundation of craft, but, more importantly, they let us see how definitions of craft shift and clash over time and space. Next, I draw upon compositionists who produced ideas parallel to our craft theorists. From the process debates to definitions of new media composition that highlight the aura of the digital, these writing theorists further stressed the multiplicity of craft and aid us in seeing composition as design—the creation of texts that are used to do something in/to/with the world. Finally, I cite pseudonymous interviews I recorded in 2012 with three crafters who are also expert digital knowledge workers: Donna (a technology admin and knitter), Jo (a digital doctoral candidate and cross stitcher), and Kit (a digital video artist and furniture fabricator). These three women (aged 26–38) craft at their high-tech workplaces to counter the ephemerality and alienation of their digital work and, thus, help us to see craft as an active balance of new digital composing logics and older craft ones.¹

2. Methods and goals: An archaeology of “craft” as god term

As you’ve probably gathered from my earlier use of the now nefarious term “dichotomy,” one of the larger goals of this essay is baring the systems of knowledge and power beneath craft and, thereby, rethinking any univocal/dualist view of design. To do so, I perform an *archaeology of a god term*. In *Power and Knowledge*, Michel Foucault (1980) distinguished his *archaeology* from his *genealogy*, stating that archaeology revealed systems of knowledge and sanctioned logics where “‘genealogy’ would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play” (p. 85). Archaeology

¹ Through this combination of sources, which primarily focus on the design of *things* rather than traditional texts, I hope to present the link between composition and design as more than a focus on multimodality or visual rhetoric. Rather, a focus on craft design as composition helps writers, students, and instructors see composing as a “wicked problem” (Buchanan, 1995; Marback, 2009) of audience interaction in which the writer/designer comes to see passive audiences as active users who, well away from the author, will operate the text as tool in order to do things in/to/with the world.

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