



The Adaptive Process of Multimodal Composition: How Developing Tacit Knowledge of Digital Tools Affects Creative Writing

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Abstract

Many creative writers are turning to digital media and multimodal composition as an emerging genre of storytelling; many, however, do not have sufficient familiarity with digital tools to compose digital texts. Digital literacy is still an emerging area of pedagogy; online literacy and multimedia composition are becoming more prominent in classrooms, and deeper understanding of the effects of these tools on individual students and their work is crucial to development of teaching practice. Tacit knowledge of written narrative alone does not permit the creative writer to fully realize the narrative possibilities inherent in the multimodal form. This paper communicates the results of a practice-based research project, *Færwhile*, conducted expressly to examine the changes wrought in the creative writer's process and understanding of narrative by shifting to a multimodal, digital composition process. In this paper, I analyze my creative works prior, during, and after development of explicit knowledge of digital fiction and digital composition tool, and discuss how internalizing this explicit knowledge alters the creative composition process. These conclusions, drawn from an in-depth experimentation for the express purposes of research, have implications not only for individual creative writers, but for students and teachers moving into multimodal forms of digital communication. Crown Copyright © 2016 Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: digital composition; creative writing; cognition; written composition; multimodal composition; practice-based research

1. Introduction

For the current generation of students, engagement in digital media is an everyday practice, from reading and viewing content to writing and disseminating content. A significant pedagogical digital divide remains, however, between these students' digital practices, and the approaches to communication taught in classrooms (Hundley & Holbrook, 2013). It is important not only that educators and teachers develop pedagogical tools and approaches to address communications in these new media, but also that we understand the fundamental, cognitive differences between writing for the page and writing for digital media; little research has been done to date to help us understand how writers and students negotiate multimodal/digital composition (DePalma & Alexander, 2015). This paper examines a practice-based case study comparing the creative writing process as it evolves for digital composition, specifically addressing how greater tacit knowledge and experience with digital tools affects the writer at work, using digital fiction composition as a model. As such, this research serves as a foundation for expanded studies in classrooms, for both academic and creative composition practices.

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Digital fiction, by definition, is multimodal, capable of incorporating the written word, images (both still and moving), audio, and elements of interactivity between the text and the reader (Bell et al., 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Not every writer who is intrigued by the narrative possibilities of digital media has the explicit knowledge of digital platforms necessary to compose digital texts. Similarly, students learning to communicate ideas and stories are far more likely to be taught conventional print writing: “much of what counts as good writing in schools does not reflect evolving notions of texts” (Hundley & Holbrook, 2013, p. 500). While most students and writers have a tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) of written narrative developed through the reading and writing elements of formal education and their reading and writing practices, they must develop explicit knowledge of their new media and internalize this explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge¹ in order to fully realize the narrative possibilities inherent in multimodal forms.

This paper is primarily concerned with how changes in the writer’s knowledge affect the foundational aspects of the composition of texts for digital media: understanding the rhetorical problem; responding to the rhetorical problem with relevant information, organization, and interpretation; and translating that knowledge into the actualized text. The rhetorical problem of this project’s creative texts was to convey a narrative that functioned effectively in two parallel forms: analogue (print, or monomodal) and digital (multimodal). Inherent in that rhetorical problem were the questions of character, plot, setting, tone, language, and structure that inform any attempt to write a fictional story. Adding multimodality into the mix, however, added difficulty in “trying to articulate how the transduction works, recognizing the variety of individual and social and cultural factors that contribute to its working as it does” (Fortune, 2005, p. 53).

Ron Fortune noted that the few instructional texts that exist on multimodal creativity are largely concerned with how to use verbal and visual modes to illustrate or explain one another, rather than on developing Kress’s mental “process of synaesthesia” (cited in Fortune, 2005, p. 53) in texts engaging multiple semiotic modes. Similarly, Melanie Hundley and Teri Holbrook report that teachers are often reluctant to instruct students to compose multimodally (2013). In the current scarcity of such pedagogical resources, digital writers often develop this synesthesia individually, through reading and writing digital fiction as an exploratory action, in order to better engage with the rhetorical problem inherent in such multimodal texts. Multimodal composition engages more naturally and fluidly with the planning process of composition, according to Linda Flower & John Hayes’s 1984 Multiple Representation Theory, which posited that the initial mental model of a text is multimodal, then subsequently translated to written language. This process also deepens the “intertextual landscape of the composing space” (Ranker, 2008, p. 229).

This intertextual landscape is an area of interest to this paper. As that landscape shifted over the three years of the multimodal composition activities described in the following sections, the author’s explicit knowledge of digital fiction changed and began to internalize; its changes became apparent even in analogue writing. “Our reading and writing are in dialogue with each other as we write in direct and indirect response to what we have read before, and we read in relation to the ideas we have articulated in our own writing” (Bazerman, 2004, p. 53). Specifically, growing knowledge and familiarity with digital fiction led to increased instances of Gérard Genette’s hypertextuality (playing the texts off familiarity with other texts in the genre) and architextuality (exploring generic expectations in relation to other similar texts) (Genette, 1997, pp. 2–5; cf. Bazerman, 2004, p. 58), as well as the intratextuality formed by references to elements of the text-in-progress (Bazerman, 2004, p. 62).

Deborah Brandt noted that “. . . writing — like any other language act — is a profoundly social enterprise, and. . . what a writer does during composing is best understood in relationship to the social event that he or she is in the process of accomplishing” (1989, p. 152). This paper examines the composition of the first drafts of the parallel analogue novella, composed during the “social event” of the author’s introduction to digital fiction, as I learned to write in multiple media. The creative pieces discussed here were composed over the course of approximately 3.5 years (September 2008–January 2012), from the point of minimal awareness of the digital fiction genre, to a point of development that permitted me to create digital texts in several different platforms. The first creative piece analyzed, “Last Stop Bar & Grill” (Skains, 2010), illustrates the zero state: this analogue short story was written prior to developing knowledge of and engaging in the intertextual landscape of digital fiction, and shows the writing process in monomodal

¹ Ikujiro Nonaka & Hirotaka Takeuchi defined explicit knowledge as that which is easily codified and transmitted, and tacit knowledge as “personal knowledge embedded in individual experience and involves intangible factors such as personal belief, perspective, and the value system” (1995, p. viii). They defined the process of internalization as translating explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge.

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