



Framing Remix Rhetorically: Toward A Typology of Transformative Work

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Available online 24 December 2015

Abstract

Since it entered the critical lexicon in composition and rhetoric, *remix* has become an increasingly popular topic for scholarly work and pedagogical focus. Despite its pervasiveness, remix remains a cumbersome and overwhelming conceptual category. As such, this article has two interconnected purposes: To develop a pliable and useable framework for understanding the rhetorical significance of remix, and to begin to chart some of the major types of remix writers compose today. I open by arguing that the rhetorical concept of imitation (*imitatio*) can serve as a malleable frame both to understand the rhetorical importance of remix and to help map the many ways in which remix writers accomplish their rhetorical goals. After developing this frame, I offer a four-part typology of remix: assemblage, reappropriation, redistribution, and genre play. Finally, I close by providing strategies for teaching and directions for future research.

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Keywords: remix; imitation; digital rhetoric; composition pedagogy; invention

1. Introduction

Allow me to start with four scenarios:

1. A composer compiles a video using several already-existing materials, including images, film footage, sound bytes, music, animations, and so on. The final text, though patched together from many different source texts, is a coherent five-minute argument that claims political change cannot happen by simply voting for a particular candidate.
2. A YouTube user constructs a capitalist critique using an already-made video advertisement. The composer does not shoot any original clips, nor does the composer add an original voiceover. Once complete, the composer does, however, provide a radically different message than the original advertisement by inserting alphabetic writing in strategic moments throughout the video.
3. A presidential nominee makes a comment during a nationally televised debate that sparks a meme-generating frenzy. Within minutes of this occurrence, several texts are made, distributed, redistributed, modified, and re-modified—all relying on variations of the original phrase uttered by the nominee. The widely circulated phrase becomes a famous—if not infamous—catchphrase of the election season.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2015.11.007>

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4. A student designs a standardized test with mock reading passages, questions, and directions that calls into question the current fixation on standardized testing in primary and secondary schools in the United States. By playing with the typified genre conventions of standardized tests, the student asks her readers to interrogate the values and actions of the current testing system and the political contexts in which they emerged.

These scenarios, as our current vocabulary would have them, likely fall under the conceptual umbrella of remix—that is, each explicitly builds upon or repurposes already existing material. Taken together, these scenarios, each real pieces of writing that have impacted real audiences, show the rhetorical potential of *transforming*¹ already-existing materials into new texts for new audiences. My point in sharing these scenarios is not only to emphasize commonality but also to demonstrate difference. Indeed, remix has come to signify a wide range of meaning and practice. Take the above scenarios as cases in point: the first composer assembles an argument by strategically compiling several already existing texts into one coherent narrative; the second radically repurposes a single text to offer critical commentary; writers in the third scenario share, update, and intervene in the rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009; Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012) of an already circulating text; and the fourth composer playfully refashions a common genre for the purposes of critique. In effect, these texts—each a kind of remix—are distinctive in purpose, delivery, design, and style.

Similarly, remix has come to represent an expansive range of meaning in computers and writing scholarship. Recent work has positioned remix—as a concept, as a practice, as a genre, as a method—in wide and varied ways: as a means to enter and participate in political exchanges (e.g., Dietel-McLaughlin, 2009; Dubisar & Palmeri, 2010), as a method of making arguments, solving problems, and effecting social change (e.g., Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007; Kuhn, 2012), as a way to participate in communities (Jenkins, 2009; Stedman, 2012), as a research and conceptual method (e.g., Palmeri, 2012; Pough, 2010; Yancey, 2009), and as a theoretical frame to view culture, authorship, and intellectual property (e.g., DeVoss & Porter, 2006; Lessig, 2008; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). In short, remix is a loaded term. It has, nevertheless, emerged as an increasingly significant writing practice in digital culture. Although scholars have importantly noted that remix need not only refer to the digital (e.g., Delagrange, 2009; Hesse, Sommers, & Yancey, 2012; Palmeri, 2012), the relative ease of manipulating material in the ever-expanding digital archives hosted online, coupled with the possibility for mentorship and participation in community networks, has allowed remix to flourish in digitally mediated contexts. From the emergence of online remix communities, such as Vidders.net, TotalRecut.com, and ccMixter.com, to the rise of remix artists of public intellectual renown, such as Jonathan McIntosh and Elisa Kreisinger, it appears remix has secured itself as an enduring and profound practice worthy of continued inquiry. It is perhaps because of its relatively quick ascendance to such heightened popularity in scholarly pursuits and public spheres that remix remains a cumbersome, if not overwhelming, concept.

How might we better harness the pedagogical usefulness of remix in more accessible and illustrative ways? If we are to accept remix as a valid and important composing practice, one that has the potential to teach a wealth of rhetorical knowledge for a digital age, we need to further develop and refine approaches to discuss the many nuances involved in transforming already existing material. A possible way to reconcile the sprawling posture of remix in writing practice is to develop a typology that begins to delineate the rhetorical distinctions among types of remixed compositions. Here, I work toward such a typology by outlining four varieties of remix—assemblage, reappropriation, redistribution, and genre play—in an effort to alleviate confusion about a term encumbered with excessive meaning.

In addition to relieving obfuscation, writing specialists would benefit from developing a remix typology for two other interconnected reasons. First, a remix typology does valuable work in asserting the often-touted epistemological commitments that undergird the fields of rhetoric and composition and computers and writing. These commitments, predicated on values of collaboration (e.g., Lunsford & Ede, 1992), sharing (e.g., DeVoss & Porter, 2006), and problem solving (e.g., Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007), suggest that we need to lend serious consideration to the task of teaching what constitutes meaningful and productive authorship in a digital economy of writing. Such a task, as many scholars have argued (e.g., Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007; Howard, 1999; Lunsford, 1999; Robbins, 2003), involves reconceptualizing notions of originality and ownership that have persisted since the Romantic era, and replacing them

¹ I use “transformative” for two key reasons: first, to signal that this work has new rhetorical purpose, and second, to argue that this work adheres to fair use guidelines. As Patricia Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi (2012) noted, work that is transformative—that is, work “recontextualized and re-presented for a new purpose, and to a new audience” (p. 81)—is more likely to be deemed fair in U.S. courts.

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