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Digital Scholarship and Interactivity: A Study of Commenting Features in Networked Books

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Abstract

Digital scholarly publishing is moving toward the use of commenting features, which allow readers to contribute to the knowledge production of the publication and establish a community of readers within a digital text. In this article, I use theories of interactivity in order to articulate some of the potentials as well as challenges that are inherent in using commenting features within digital scholarship. In using interactivity as the main theory through which scholars understand their decisions about commenting functions, this article argues, digital scholars will better be able to frame the interactions that can occur among readers and the author within the online scholarship.

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The practice of annotation has often been traced back to medieval manuscript cultures. Medieval scholars used margins as spaces to share knowledge and interpret texts (Wolfe, 2002). Along with the rise of print culture, too, a rich tradition of reader annotations developed—most popularly discussed under the term *marginalia* (Jackson, 2005; Yale, 2011). Digital innovations, as J. Elizabeth Clark (2011) reminded readers, now offer authors the chance to fuse the “creativity of the individual monk illuminating a manuscript” with the “power of digitally distributed knowledge,” transforming reader annotations from scribbled marginalia in a printed book to typed comments that are the “property of shared community” (p. 28). Indeed, scholars publishing online have begun to open their books up to readers for marginal comments using annotation technologies, creating communities of discussion and interpretation. In this article, I examine the opportunities and challenges for authors who want to integrate these types of commenting features into their online scholarship.¹ This article employs theories of interactivity to analyze these commenting features, discussing the structural and interpersonal decisions authors need to consider before implementing reader feedback technologies into their scholarship.

While scholars have worked to categorize and theorize the scholarly activity happening on the web (Barton, 2005; Burton, 2009; Purdy & Walker, 2010; Warner, 2007), commenting features have received relatively little attention. In

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¹ I use the term “commenting features” to stand for online reader feedback for two reasons: 1) To avoid emphasizing one technology over another, as I am more concerned with how commenting features function; and 2) Most often, when users click to give feedback in online scholarly texts, the button is titled “comment,” thus making *commenting features* an apropos term. The term also helps to distinguish this online practice amongst competing terms such as *print marginalia* or *reader reviews* while still recognizing a connection.

a study of digital scholarly work occurring in various online spaces including webtexts, blogs, Twitter, and discussion forums, James Purdy and Joyce Walker (2012) went so far as to code for *dialogic exchange*, looking at when scholarly works encouraged and enacted direct or indirect dialogue, and they concluded that these spaces often served as a direct outlet to more formal scholarly productions because the ideas developed there found their way into other scholarship. Yet, it was likely beyond the scope of their excellent and extensive analysis to carefully theorize the types of exchanges that can happen. To extend and complicate their analysis, I analyze the scholarly activity happening on the fringes and in the margins of digital scholarship and suggest that this work, too, should be considered worthy scholarly activity. “When we disregard the knowledge-making practices and rhetorical moves possible and happening in digital spaces, we risk disenfranchising a whole generation of knowledge producers,” Purdy and Walker (2012) argued. To take up their argument, I analyze one such rhetorical move—commenting features. I agree with William Wolff (2013) that computers and writing researchers need to pay more attention to the interactivity “embedded in and afforded by” Web 2.0 (p. 211), and one obvious place to start is by looking at these interactive commenting features.

I focus specifically on the commenting employed in the genre of digital scholarship—in particular, the networked book, described later. Following Cheryl Ball (2004), I use the term *digital scholarship* when describing networked books in order to delineate online scholarly texts in which the written word is prominent; the argument is linear; and standard print conventions are conformed to, such as the use of a table of contents, chapters, and page numbers. *New media scholarship*, on the other hand, “uses modes other than only written text to form an argument” and “break[s] away from linear modes of print traditions” (Ball, 2004, p. 405). Steve Anderson and Tara McPherson (2011) instead used the term *multimedia scholarship*, suggesting these are works that employ “multiple media.. . user interactivity, a networked or database structure, nonlinear components, and a heightened attention to aspects of design, aesthetics, or form” (pp. 137–138). Networked books do not typically constitute the multimodal, performative, experimental publications discussed by these researchers. Yet, it is exactly this field’s use of new media (or multimedia) scholarship that demonstrates there is something at stake in the issue of reader commentary. In other words, I make the distinction between new media scholarship and digital scholarship here not to say that commenting features should not be employed in both (as I think they should), but to point out that although our field explores many innovative possibilities in the design of our online journals and manuscripts, commenting features are rarely among those choices, even though authors of networked books—more traditional online compositions by our standards—are exploring this opportunity. The computers and writing community is publishing excellent new media scholarship in the pages of *Kairos* and *Computers and Composition Online* (see, for example, Anderson, 2011; Johnson-Eilola, 2012; Kleinfeld, 2012), but, as such, it is surprising that commenting functions are rarely used, given the field’s penchant for innovation and experimentations with multimodality. Similar sites available for book-length works, such as the Computers and Composition Digital Press and Open Humanities Press, also do not yet offer commenting functions. These decisions could be due to technological concerns or the preference of authors and editors. Sometimes, for example, online publications need access to the HTML files to host the publications on their server, which can limit authors from using platforms like Blogger. Either way, my aim is not to critique a particular publication’s methods but to suggest how to use an additional feature that has generative potentials for authors and readers.

In English studies (particularly rhetoric and composition), digital scholarship has gained status as a valuable form of scholarly production, but work still needs to be done. As Steve Krause argued in 2007, “few of us in English studies nowadays would label articles published [online] as ‘not scholarship’ for the purposes of tenure and review” (para. 4). The problem often lies with “new media scholarship” (Ball, 2004) or “multimedia scholarship” (Anderson & McPherson, 2011). Evaluating this scholarly work for tenure and promotion is a documented challenge. Purdy and Walker (2010) contended:

Though we are beginning to recognize the importance of digital work, discussions have tended to focus primarily on establishing digital work as equivalent to print publications to make it count instead of considering how digital scholarship might transform knowledge-making practices. (p. 178)

A year later, Anderson and McPherson (2011) made a similar argument that while there has been progress, tenure and promotion committees are “not now well-equipped” to evaluate multimedia scholarship (pp. 137–138). To deal with these concerns, researchers have suggested the field must build new values into its tenure and promotion guidelines (Braun & Gilbert, 2008) by disentangling assumptions associated with print from these guidelines (Day, Delagrangue, Palmquist, Pemberton, & Walker, 2013), rewarding faculty for using a more “comprehensive range of scholarly contributions” (Purdy & Walker, 2010, p. 192), and bringing together guidelines from a variety of fields in order to develop

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