Eternal or Ephemera? The Myth of Permanence in Online Writing

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Abstract

For many, the permanence of online texts is an unquestionable fact. Though the assumption of permanence does hold a degree of truth, this article asserts that it is not necessarily the default mode we believe it to be within the digital era. Through an analysis of various digital media, this article will illuminate a number of cracks and fissures within the veneer of permanence. These gaps manifest in three primary forms: incompatibility and obsolescence; insecurity and deletion; and obscurity. As many composition instructors move to increasingly digital pedagogies, these digital gaps and losses become ever more alarming. Instead of urging writers away from digital texts, this analysis prompts one central question: Is longevity in the digital realm desirable? Rather than answering this question ourselves, this article pushes for an increased focus on temporality within the composition classroom so that we can engage in these conversations not *for* our students, but *with them*. Urging students to consider these questions of temporality is a first step towards more responsible and informed digital composition practices.
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For many, the permanence of online texts is an unquestionable fact. Every status update, photo album, blog entry, forum comment, and chat conversation remains floating out there in the great gaping world of binary code, interminably, indefinitely, forever. In fact, the sheer persistence of these digital texts has become the stuff of lore. The unlucky co-ed busted for photos with alcohol. The employee fired for posting a status ranting about a boss or company policy. Students and professionals alike are often haunted by these tales. Such stories are exchanged in gossip, passed on as warnings, spouted as lectures. This is the new mediated Miranda right: anything you post can and will be used against you.

Admittedly, this is the popular account of the situation. It is a bit dramatized; sensationalized to catch and hold the attention of the masses. Still, the underlying assumption is worth noting. That is, the utter permanence of digital texts is a given for many. Perpetuity is typically assumed and this notion is not unique to popular culture. In fact, an increasing number of scholars are taking an interest in the permanence of digital texts (Brooke, 2000; Pruchnic & Lacey, 2001; Swadley, 2008; Mayer-Schönberger, 2009; Skinnell, 2010). Many of these scholars have jumped eagerly into the world of the digital, exploring, examining and debating the various advantages and drawbacks of permanence within the digital realm. While their accounts of digital permanence are considerably less sensational than the popular versions, these scholars tend to be no less certain than the general public about the longevity of digital texts. Permanence is all too often assumed to be an inherent feature of digital media.

Though this assumption of permanence does hold a degree of truth, I will assert that it is not necessarily the default mode we believe it to be within the digital era. Through an analysis of various digital media, I will illuminate a number of cracks and fissures within the veneer of permanence. These gaps, insignificant though they may seem, have already done significant damage, allowing countless texts to slip from the digital memory. Those in academia often feel the

effects of these gaps most intimately. Students and scholars alike can attest to the numerous flaws in the system, each with his or her personal story of frustration and, often, loss. Some of these cases will be discussed in further detail below, serving to illustrate the various lapses and failures of digital longevity.

As many composition instructors move to increasingly digital pedagogies, these digital gaps and losses become ever more alarming. Many instructors now assign and require a variety of digitally based texts, from the basic blog post to social networking interactions to complex and elaborate multi-modal texts that span networks and media. But what is the shelf life of these works? I have the luxury of flipping open a three-ring binder and tabbing through pages to access my old coursework. Will today's students, composing in the digital tradition, have the same security? These questions are not meant as a neo-Luddite's warning to retreat back to the safety of our typewriters and filing cabinets. Instead, they are meant to point to a new and evolving attitude towards composition, one that can help us to embrace the advances and, yes, the flaws of the digital age. What we may lose in longevity we gain by opening up larger discussions of temporality. But to know where the future is heading, we must first understand the recent state of scholarship on digital permanence.

1. The Myth of Permanence

As instructors and students began to embrace digital texts in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a large contingent of scholars rushed to embrace digital media as a panacea for posterity. Jeff Pruchnic and Kim Lacey (2001) have noted the benefits of digital texts in their article, "The Future of Forgetting: Rhetoric, Memory, Affect." Here, Pruchnic and Lacey discuss the ease and convenience of storage as it becomes increasingly digitized, stored safely in a number of electronic devices ranging from computers and smart phones to USB drives and databases. Thanks to the wonder of technology, one's collective body of work can now be easily stored and filed away on a flash drive smaller than one's pinky finger. Yet while most individuals do store digital texts on their own personal computers, flash drives, or hard drives; many (if not most) digital texts are typically stored online through websites, blogs, social media, and online storage facilities. These digital texts become part of a larger body of digital texts. They become a small piece of the giant digital storage system that is the World Wide Web, a body of information and documents that grows larger every second of every day. Because of its sheer size, this collective storage system is often assumed to be "too big to fail." But that policy has proved problematic in the past.

Perhaps the most renowned scholar on the topic of digital permanence is Viktor Mayer-Schönberger (2009), author of *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age.* Mayer-Schönberger's text offers a comprehensive discussion of digital texts and the comfort of digital permanence in our mediated world. According to Mayer-Schönberger, four main factors contribute to the permanence of digital texts: digitization, cheap storage, easy retrieval, and global reach. And indeed, technologically speaking, digitally storing texts is cheap, easy, and painless. Much like Pruchnic and Lacey, Mayer-Schönberger has argued that the ease of digital storage is contributing to a larger shift in the way we approach digital texts, "This overabundance of available storage capacity makes it easy for us to shift our behavioral default regarding external memory from forgetting to remembering" (p. 67). According to Mayer-Schönberger, "With such an abundance of cheap storage, it is simply no longer economical to even decide whether to remember or forget" (p. 68). In essence, Mayer-Schönberger has asserted that storing digital texts has become so easy, so affordable, that it is not even worth thinking about whether or not to store digital texts. It should be automatic. Lev Manovich (2002) has offered a similar argument, neatly summarizing his point in one colorful sentence: "Thus, if in 'meatspace' we have to work to remember, in cyberspace we have to work to forget" (62-63). In many ways, this assessment of digital permanence hits home. For many, this process of digital storage has indeed become automatic.

Mayer-Schönberger has pushed his argument a step further, though, moving into more philosophical territory about the nature of mankind:

> It is a very human strategy to ensure that we haven't lived in vain, that we aren't quickly forgotten after our deaths as if we've never lived. . The result is a world that is set to remember, and that has little if any incentive to forget. . Today, forgetting has become costly and difficult, while remembering is inexpensive and easy. With the help of digital tools we—individually and as a society—have begun to unlearn forgetting. (p. 91-2)

Perhaps we, as humans, do wish for our digital texts to carry on into posterity. And our technological affordances do enable a certain degree of ease in storing and safeguarding digital texts.