



# Why Making?

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## Abstract

Making is beginning to enter the popular imagination as well as the field of computers and writing. It was the subject of the 2013 Computers and Writing Keynote by James Paul Gee, and continues to pop up in conference programs, journal articles, and books. My purpose in this article is to define and explore making and present justifications for its importance to computers and writing. I first survey important historical influences on contemporary making practices in order to provide a historical basis for the maker movement. I then argue that teachers and scholars within computers and writing are already makers and that we should consider ourselves as such. Finally, I present implications of adopting maker practices and technologies for the field.

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## 1. Introduction

Making is beginning to enter the popular imagination as well as the field of computers and writing. It was the subject of the 2013 Computers and Writing Keynote by James Paul Gee, and continues to pop up in conference programs, journal articles, and books. I undertake this project in order to begin taking the first steps toward confronting making as an entity in the discourse of computers and writing. For this to happen, we must first explain, define, and understand the historic roots of making and prevailing theories that describe what's happening when a person makes.

Making is the process of creating something outside of traditional manufacturing processes. Making can involve the use of technology of any kind. I find that in conversations with my colleagues, students, and friends that making is frequently conflated with inventing. In this way, making often intimidates people as they believe that in order to create something of import to the community they must wade into a sea of wires and circuit boards. This is not the case. Dale Dougherty (2012), founder of Makerfaire and *Make* magazine, avoids “the word ‘inventor’” because “most people just don't identify themselves that way. ‘Maker,’ on the other hand, describes each one of us, no matter how we live our lives or what our goals might be. We all are makers: as books preparing food for our families, as gardeners, as knitters” (p. 11). Inclusivity is a major theme in the contemporary maker movement, both in key players and key technologies.

In this article, I argue that making is important to writing studies broadly, but very important to computers and writing. When I began the process of writing this article, it occurred to me that individuals in the field of computers and writing are already very interested in the practices used by makers and the products they create, even if they aren't yet using the term “maker.” These differing threads of interest, though, could use a space for patching them together. I want to present a few different points of convergence to make a case for making. Incredibly rich and important work

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is being done by makers that changes relationships between people and technology. The maker movement focuses on these practices, enacting the calls of our very own scholars in their work. We should capitalize on the attention paid to makers in the contemporary moment. These aims converge with the goals of computers and writing and are worth exploring.

I begin with a brief survey that explains some of the history and broad cultural moments that have influenced making. Next, I argue that teachers and scholars within computers and writing are makers. Finally, I will explore a set of implications that outline how making can further help refine our teaching and scholarship, and some of the potential drawbacks of adopting maker practices and technologies. Throughout this article, I use the term “making” because it carries a positive cultural connotation. Making is also a useful umbrella term that encompasses many kinds of content production such as DIY (do-it-yourself) and crafting. Making often involves practices like hacking, but many makers (myself included) avoid the term hacking because of its negative public perception.

## 2. Making is the contemporary manifestation of historic phenomena

Making didn’t just start a few years ago; its roots are in industrialism and mass manufacture. In *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan (1991) explore the origins of arts and crafts as a reaction to industrialization. The movement was founded by designers and labor theorists in Victorian England, largely as a reaction to perceived alienation from labor. The leaders of this movement valued individualism and creativity as opposed to profits and mass-market capitalism. It is important to note that from its inception, there were no prescribed or unified styles. All creations were welcome (Cumming & Kaplan, 1991, p. 9). Craft was taught and encouraged as a practice of moral reform, one that could help individuals connect with nature (Cumming & Kaplan, 1991, p. 13). There were also moral dimensions to the movement. A. W. N. Pugin, a leading proponent of the arts and crafts movement, viewed architecture and physical creation as an act of mirroring a Judeo-Christian logic. Art critic John Ruskin was another important figure in the movement that publicly called for organic design and production and the end of the machine-driven model of Victorian production. Both of these figures were prolific writers, and their work would inform the purposes of the arts and crafts movement for generations (Cumming & Kaplan, 1991, p. 12). William Morris was another central figure in this movement. One of his largest goals was to pioneer methods of production that would democratize art, moving it from museums to the homes of all (Cumming & Kaplan, 1991, p. 16–18). The efforts of these figures culminated with the formation of various guilds, organizations, and publications that pushed the influence of the arts and crafts movement ever outward. By the 1890s, several large craft shows (limited to men only) had occurred throughout England (Cumming & Kaplan, 1991, p. 26). The arts and crafts movement opened to women as social and professional opportunities opened (Cumming & Kaplan, 1991, p. 104).

According to Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver (2013), the arts and craft movement ultimately declined due to the economic infeasibility of democratizing art (p. 126). Though many designers and guilds had created objects within the movement that reflected the values of simplicity and connection to labor, there was still the issue of extending the ownership of these objects to a large audience. These undertakings were often prohibitively expensive, undermining the ideological roots of the arts and crafts movement. This ideological decline predates the very physical decline of the First World War. Materials and goods under ration meant that large scale Arts and Crafts works were abandoned in favor of a more rugged consumer culture. These pressures resulted in the rise of do-it-yourself culture.

In their book *Adhocism*, Jencks and Silver (2013) define Ad hoc as the practice of DIY, a new method of assembling several readily available components. Jencks and Silver (2013) suggests that doing-it-yourself is “the rebirth of a democratic mode and style, where everyone can create his personal environment out of impersonal subsystems, whether they are new or old, modern or antique. By realizing his immediate needs, by combining *ad hoc* parts, the individuals creates, sustains and transcends himself” (p. 15). A hallmark of making in reaction to consumer culture for Jencks is that “[i]t places purposeful action against the ideologies of determinism, and immediacy against the omnipresent delays caused by specialization and bureaucracy” (p. 19). This form of creative assemblage is also a method of viewing the world. We inhabit the postmodern moment, a pluralist world containing multiple competing ideologies. It is the individual’s task of combining and assigning order to these competing ideologies, assembling and reconfiguring them as needed. Our worldview is thus fragmented, and we can use ad hoc methods to assemble a whole, even if this whole is not cohesive (Jencks & Silver, 2013, p. 29). Jencks also points to the counterculture movement coinciding with industrial and cultural forces as the roots of DIY culture. Particularly, the hippie emphasis on re-using or repurposing

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