"It's Messy but It Works":
Talking About New Media

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Peter Lunenfeld’s *The Digital Dialectic*, Michael Joyce’s *Othermindedness*, and Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s *Remediation* comprise an interesting sample of contemporary work on new media in three disciplines loosely aligned with rhetoric and composition: communication, literary theory, and philosophy. At one point, I had attempted to pigeonhole each text into a discipline, but as with much work in new media theory, disciplinary distinctions collapse. On the whole, each of these texts provides interesting overviews of current issues in scholarship on new media. They are thought-provoking, wide-ranging, and written with clarity. Not coincidentally, each of the texts attempts to frame the emergence of new media in our culture in terms of a dialectic: a recursive interplay between various aspects. For Bolter and Grusin, new media remediate old (and vice versa), with each affecting the other in substantial if often unconsidered ways. For Joyce, the emerging network culture provides space and impetus for a new understanding of the relations between individual and culture (among other things). For the authors in Lunenfeld’s collection (and to some extent for the authors of the other two volumes), nearly every aspect of new media contains dialectical tensions and movements.

I’ll begin with Bolter and Grusin’s book because it is the most ambitious, attempting to outline a new theory of understanding new media, and because it specifically takes up the theme of the relationships among new and old media. The book is divided into three sections: an overview of its key concept, “remediation,” followed by a series of eleven brief discussions of the remediating qualities of ten different types of new
media, followed by a series of final chapters that summarize the general and potential effects of remediation on three aspects of the self: the remediated self, the virtual self, and the networked self.

The concept of remediation, like Bolter and Grusin's book itself, will be both familiar and new to most media scholars. Launching off of McLuhan's famous contention that the content of any medium is always another medium, Bolter and Grusin double McLuhan's maxim by inverting it, with all new media remaining in "a constant dialectic with earlier media." In other words, just as television tended to adopt the content and form of film or vaudeville, film and vaudeville themselves adapted aspects of television. In turn, as computer interfaces begin to adopt the content and form of television, television remediates the interface with the use, for example, of multiply windowed screens such as those common on CNN.

Remediations is remarkable for its ability to pull together a wide array of material, ranging from French performance artist Orlan's plastic surgeries (in which the performance artist is surgically modified to take on aspects of, among other fine art models, Boticelli's Venus and da Vinci's Mona Lisa) to the computer game Myst (remediating both book and film). Along the way we move through a discussion of pornography on the Internet (as a remediation of videotape), the remediation of Vermeer via physical and virtual three-dimensional models, and the remediation of "traditional" theme parks such as Coney Island by the hypermediated spaces of Disney World, a space in turn remediated by shopping malls. As Bolter and Grusin argue, every form of media (or even representation) recursively affects every other form. And many media, such as photorealistic computer graphics, implicitly rely on the notion that the images appear real but are not. The hypermediacy of an image such as Todd Siechen's widely reproduced computer graphic Kodak Film is interesting not because it shows us a highly detailed but obviously computer-generated Kodacolor Gold 200 film canister and box. A photograph of a box of film would be a simpler solution to representing the "realness" of the image. The Kodak Film computer graphic is not about representing reality; it's interesting because it's not quite the same as a photograph.

The constant oscillation here between understanding a particular medium as both transparent and opaque (or hypermediated) provides the philosophical hinge on which most of Remediation turns. This observation, which Bolter and Grusin draw from Richard Lanham's distinction between looking at and looking through, offers important ways to
understand how we understand media, a method for both analyzing and, potentially, making remediations. Computer texts—the convergence of media—can be understood either as attempts at transparency (with immersive virtual reality attempting to erase the “virtual” of that term) or as attempts at hypermediacy (with dense, windowed computer interfaces and with ubiquitous computing’s insistence on interfaces distributed throughout the real environment).

The wide range and clarity of Bolter and Grusin’s text makes it an important resource as an entry point into new media studies; they hit on all the key themes and areas, providing smart and suggestive overviews that would be useful in, for example, a graduate survey course on media, where this book might serve as a kind of Reader’s Digest version of new media theory. At the same time, as a scholarly text Remediations suffers from a condition that affects not only all three texts under review here but much of new media studies in general: they recuperate much traditional philosophy and thinking about media but fail to come to grips with the implications of the media revolution; they fail to understand not merely in the day after the revolution looking backward, but to live through the day after the day after the revolution. For example, in their discussions of the presence of the self in media, Bolter and Grusin argue that media designers have opted for either romantic strategies (virtual reality strives to be a true experience of reality) or modernist strategies (hypermedia artifacts in the interface or out in the environment focus on the very act of their various (re)mediations).

Notably missing through most of this discussion (with rare exceptions) are postmodernist understandings of media, which would adopt a more pedestrian attitude toward the proliferation of media. In other words, a modernist understanding of hypermediated texts relies on the continual shock of the new. But what of users who no longer hold much of a distinction between animation and photorealism—a distinction discussed at length in several places? Juxtaposing two such texts (the opposing graphical styles of Disney’s Beauty and the Beast and Toy Story, for example) strikes a modernist as a thrilling hypermediation; to a postmodernist, they are merely two texts, two among an infinite number of swarming information articulations. Adults of Bolter and Grusin’s generation revel in how close high-end virtual reality can come to just plain reality; they rely heavily on the unresolved tension inherent in virtual reality: Can I inhabit a patently false image? Can I be fooled? Therein lies the functioning of remediation, in the oscillation between hypermediation and transparency. When that distinction begins to
function differently—not as a replacement or as a shock but as standard operating procedure—the philosophical import of remediation becomes less interesting.

Contemporary and future work in media will fail to make distinctions between transparency and opaqueness. Although Bolter and Grusin resist interrogating the hierarchy separating reality from media, we are fast approaching (and are perhaps already within) an era when media remediate reality, and vice versa. Although Bolter and Grusin do repeatedly assert that our understandings of the relations between media and reality are to some extent always cultural constructs, they continually uphold the distinction in relatively conventional ways. When they do discuss the remediation of reality by media, the relative outlandishness of their examples (such as performance-art plastic surgery) serves to shock us; in the act of raising the possibility, they distance themselves from it.

This discomfort surfaces tellingly in Bolter and Grusin’s frequent use of the term “rhetoric” as pejorative. While most of us are all too familiar with the unfortunate baggage attached to the word for most of the public, the unexamined reliance on a surface/depth distinction—and the notion that “surface” is false and “depth” is real—signals the solidity of that division in Remediations. This is certainly not a fatal flaw, but a systematic issue to be unpacked. None of my criticism should be seen as dismissive—Remediations offers a lot to contemporary work on new media.

Michael Joyce’s Othermindedness also offers much to contemporary work on new media, especially in that it reflects an overt interest in sketching out a future for new media, even as Joyce admits frequently to not being able to see clearly what lies ahead. His persistent attempt to unite past, present, and future in purposely incoherent ways suggests a rough shape for new media that doesn’t hem readers in. Joyce calls on us—teachers, students, theorists, readers, writers, the whole multivocal, multilocal mass of being and becoming—to move beyond. For many of us, Joyce’s voice has become the embodiment of what it means to write and be written hypertextually: poetry, narrative, pedagogy, and practice are intertwined, each pulling at the other in productive and challenging ways. Through eleven chapters, some of which grew from conference papers and seminars, Joyce examines existing and developing hypertexts, web communities, an enormous range of theoretical perspectives, and (often the most interesting) himself. This work is important because it is comfortable with change, comfortable with contingency; in fact, in it we
find the possibility of comfort within the very lack of comfort—a challenge for those of us struggling to come to grips with the new media.

Othermindness offers a rich terrain for understanding and remaking our own work. This is a book not about hypertext (although in a sense it can be); this is not a book about computers (although in a sense it can be); it is not even really a book about networks (although in a sense, of course, it is). This is a book about interpersonal communication and interaction; it is about new ways of understanding communication technologies as more than mere extensions of our existing ways of working. Most importantly, this is a book about the growing pains and the self-doubts of an emerging networked culture. As Joyce explains,

Lately I find it useful to ask anyone I speak to, but especially my students, to consider what comes next after the web, not in the sense of the next browser increments, java applets, and operating system transparency, nor the next order of magnitude of increase in instantaneity or availability. At first it is a shock—especially for those who have not lived through the succession of vinyl to cassette to CD to DVD—to understand that I do not mean some mere appliance like the cable-bound network computer. Instead I mean what next literacy, what next community, what next perception, what next embodiment, what next hope, what next light.

Joyce's work carries within it a unique collection of histories, presents, and futures. In the final chapter of the work, "Portrait of the Artist as a Search Engine Entry," he explores, in the space of four pages, the contents of his wallet, a found computer screen containing his name as a search engine entry, his family (both ancestors and heirs), Charles Olson, and the propensity of the Web to hold not merely official documents, but an "animated mixture of coherence and happenstance left out for the world to see" (perhaps the contemporary version of one's wallet). Online spaces, he suggests, are neither a replacement nor a rejection of "real" places; they are increasingly intertwined, recursively composing and remediating.

Like the other two texts, Peter Lunenfeld's collection, The Digital Dialectic, concerns itself with the movement between and among different sites. Lunenfeld's text gathers work begun at a 1995 conference at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. The authors in the collection, an array of influential theorists and practitioners, provide an eclectic and often interesting series of sketches dealing with the ambivalence surrounding online spaces. This ambivalence is not—for Lunenfeld, at least—something to be done away with but an important aspect of approaching and working within online spaces. As Lunenfeld puts it in his
introduction, "To embrace ambivalence ... is to sacrifice neither rigor nor sense. It is to lodge oneself in the dialectic, where reversals are not simply expected but required."

Composed of four loosely related sections— "The Real and the Ideal," "The Body and the Machine," "The Medium and the Message," and "The World and the Screen" — the essays retain a strong sense of ambivalence, a dialectic, in Adorno's critical sense of the term, that insists on a continually open and self-aware interplay between terms. Michael Heim, for example, explores the wonderfully ironic case of the Unabomber, whose anti-technology messages gained wide distribution on the Internet. In Heim's analysis, mass media play the two sides of the cyberspace dialectic off of one another — naive realists such as the Unabomber and Kirkpatrick Sale against network idealists such as Alvin and Heidi Toffler — without engaging in the important critical understanding that those two opposites are connected rather than separate. In the often unseen but crucial gap between the two, Heim constructs "virtual realism," an "existential process of criticism, practice, and conscious communication." Other essays — including pieces by such familiar scholars as George Landow, Katherine Hayles, and William Mitchell — offer similar mediations on the theory and practice of online media.

The title of my review evokes William Mitchell's contribution to Lunenfeld's volume. Mitchell describes the textualized virtual reality of MOO discussions with the remark, "It's messy, but it works." Initially, I assumed that Mitchell was commenting on the ways that reality can be constructed out of seemingly unreal object-concepts: the dynamic give-and-take of collaboratively authored discussions rapidly scrolling up a screen begin, for many users, to form a "real" space. The "virtual" in virtual reality disappears, not because the animation is so perfect, but because it's beside the point: real is what we make it.

Reading on, though, it becomes clear that for Mitchell, "It's messy, but it works" is a grudging compliment, at best. Mitchell's goal for online spaces is that they emulate real spaces: cities, towns, malls. As with Mitchell's earlier work, the virtual world is modeled on the real. In a sense, Mitchell's observation provides an excellent and multifaceted summary of academia's current understanding of online spaces. For Mitchell, as for many of the authors contained here, online realms are (a) clearly important, (b) fascinating, and (c) not as good as "the real thing," but getting there. I agree with (a) and (b), but (c) constructs an unfounded hierarchy for online space, one that posits IRL ("in real life") as the standard by which everything is judged. As Bolter and Grusin (and others
in these texts) point out, the dialectic between being immersed in an online space and being aware of that space's very apparatus is a helpful and important perspective. But I also wonder about the point of constructing that hierarchy, if it's just an attempt to toss an anchor back into reality that allows us to explore online spaces without losing that comfortable attachment to our old selves. Or, rather, I don't wonder why one would insist on that anchor—comfort, by definition, feels nice—I wonder why that anchor isn't examined more critically.

Bob Stein's chapter, "'We Could be Better Ancestors Than This': Ethics and First Principles for the Art of the Digital Age," provides a useful starting point for that critical examination. Whereas the other essays in the collection focus primarily on interpretation, Stein applies the dialectical process in ways that move beyond the screen. Interestingly, he does not discard "the real world" for a utopian online space; instead, he attempts to recuperate virtual art by heightening its connections to the rest of the world. Stein, the founder of the Voyager Company (which released the influential Expanded Books series of CD-ROMs ranging from texts by and on Marvin Minsky to texts by Mumia Abu-Jamal), points out, "The purpose of art is to enrich our lives. But is that always its function? You always have to ask questions about art: Whom does it serve? What's it for?" By collapsing that critical distance—Stein is neither art critic nor academic; criticism for him is a functional part of the process of creation—Stein effectively removes the artificial barrier dividing "real" world from "virtual" world. In answering those questions, he poses a series of bluntly honest questions about the whole enterprise of virtual art (particularly coming from someone whose job is to produce rather than critique that process):

Instead of spending half a million dollars on a CD-ROM, maybe it would be more beneficial to spend some of this money for storytellers in the community. For example, fund people in their seventies and eighties from different cultures to tell stories to kids. Or maybe it would be better to pay for ten yoga instructors who would go out and give lessons to people. We are so alienated from our bodies at this point that before we get to the cyborg state (in the Hollywood sense), it might be much better to get used to our bodies again.

What is interesting here is not that Stein questions the social value of new media—numerous other people have offered similar pointed questions—but that Stein does not distance himself from the object he critiques.
This functional, productive process is precisely the sort of situated, self-critique that should assist those in rhetoric and composition in their efforts at self-critical production. Although we are getting better at teaching new media production, we still tend to isolate that work in unfortunate ways, often subordinating it to more traditional forms. In too many cases, we continue to separate production from critical, cultural analysis. As with these three texts, often our critical distance is maintained at the cost of production. Careful and critical thinking about new media is absolutely crucial to intervening purposefully in its production, absolutely crucial to composing. In an odd sense, these texts often seem to view the future as if it were the past. Admittedly, we can only see the future through the lens of history. But at what point do the new media shift from emulating current structures of representation and work to radically transforming representation and work? When do the new media stop being interesting simply because they’re new? And then what do we do with and within them?

Writing about new media is about more than analyzing representation, more than critique (but requiring both): it’s about living in the new world, one in which image and reality are not separate but mutually constructing, one in which we must actively, self-critically and often against other tendential forces, make our ways. Although there remains much difficult work to be done, these texts provide some starting points.

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Works Cited

