I have always been interested in the connection between writing and art. Both are systems of representation— Attempts to express, inform, educate, question, persuade, and critique humanity. For the most part, art and writing have been separated by disciplinary distinctions, but the emergence of the Internet and new communication technologies has forged a
new amalgamation. Writing can no longer be considered only language
markings on paper; images, pictures, code, and other performative
features work in concert with traditional textual forms of communication
to generate Web writing. Rhetoric and composition scholars are becom­
ing increasingly interested in these forms of visual rhetoric—whether
they are print-based or electronic—as well as in the discrete connections
between seeing and writing. As the scholarship on visual rhetoric and
Web design suggests, considering writing as something that has moved
beyond mere static words on paper requires rethinking the function and
nature of communication. With this in mind, I was excited to read Sean
Williams’ recent *JAC* article, “Process-Product Ambiguity: Theorizing
a Perspective on World Wide Web Argumentation.” Williams’ piece
attempts to reconceptualize argument, one very crucial type of writing,
within the environment of the World Wide Web. His theories of argument
on the Web are especially significant for teachers of writing, as they
attempt to integrate new electronic forms of persuasion in traditional
composition classes. And while Williams’ article accomplishes an enor­
mous feat by retooling Toulmin for the twenty-first century, I am left
troubled by his lack of discussion about the visual and performative
aspects of Web technologies and how these technologies affect
argument. This response is an attempt to think through how multimedia
technologies alter the possibilities for communicating and connecting
with others. In an era in which we have the opportunities to influence what
online writing might be, will we choose to reify traditional structures of
communication, or will we create new ones that take full advantage of
evolving digital technologies?

**Argument in Theory**

In his article, Williams seeks to “determine how to practice persuasion in
the new ways made available by the World Wide Web.” Web textuality,
according to Williams, engenders different possibilities for persuasion
than traditional written argumentation. His central claim is that in Web-
based argumentation, “interaction, made possible through an ambiguous
interplay of the author’s atemporal product and the user’s temporal
process of construction, forms the basis of persuasion” (377, 378). In
short, I read Williams’ claim as saying that interaction is the basis for
persuasion on the Web. Users must interact with a text, or must be made
to feel as if they have autonomy in their interactions with a text, in order
to be persuaded. In this sense, while authors may construct links and
structures that allow for interaction, they alone are not responsible for a
user’s persuasion; rather, as Williams explains, “Users are, in a sense, responsible for their own persuasion because the text evolves according to their choices about how to interact with the possibilities that the author provides” (385). Users participate in complex acts of self-persuasion in that authors make it seem as if users choose the links and paths they follow, when, in reality, authors specifically constrain webtexts to a range of possible paths that users can follow.

In order to elucidate his theory, Williams describes a hypothetical Web-based assignment in which students (I assume he is referring to first-year writing students) are asked to construct an argument based on representations of masculinity that they collect from various media sources. Each collected image becomes a separate Web page, a piece of “evidence,” that is accompanied by a bit of textual explanation. These linked pages form a matrix structure that functions as an argument by bringing “competing lines of reasoning into contact as Toulmin suggests arguments should, but authors subtly encode relationships they wish users to recognize by positioning specific pages adjacent to one another through links” (389). However, in order to encourage users to apprehend the position of the webtext, an introductory page for the matrix is needed: “This ‘funnel’ or ‘gateway page’ introduces users to the problems the webtext will explore and introduces key points that users will encounter later in the argument.” Along with this introductory page, Williams suggests another page: “a ‘meta-commentary’ that reflects on the Web-based argument as a whole in order to allow users access to their intentions as authors” (390). Because users may enter the hypertext structure at different points, they may never see these explanatory pages, but the pages are always potentially there to be viewed. The power of this matrix structure lies in the link, which Williams characterizes as a specifically persuasive device that authors tactically deploy in order to move users toward a particular position. Consequently, authors can maintain a linear line of reasoning by using the link to control the user’s perspective: “Web-based arguments, like all arguments, are linear because they occur in time, and so it’s up to the author to control what users see at what point in time in order to present users with a solid case for a privileged perspective while simultaneously allowing the user to make choices among links” (394). He acknowledges that these concepts of argumentation are idealized, noting that it remains to be seen how these forms correspond to or address actual Web-based arguments. For Williams, then, the Web is a medium through which we can still enact the process that we know as argument, albeit through different channels.
Argument in Real-Time
Acknowledging the idealized nature of his theories, Williams views Web-based argumentation as based on an Aristotelian understanding of rhetoric as finding the available means of persuasion. While persuasion is an important component of rhetoric, privileging argument as persuasion has its drawbacks. As popular writers such as Deborah Tannen observe, we live in an "argument culture," a world in which difference and combative rhetoric have taken hold. Argument often automatically indicates a difference of opinion or one that is hostile or heated. Recently, there have been attempts to escape such negative connotations and rethink argument as understanding or inquiry. Barbara Emmel, Paula Resch, and Deborah Tenney claim that their edited collection, Argument Revisited; Argument Redefined, attempts to move from "argument as difference to argument as understanding" (xi). This move foregrounds an attempt to use argument to promote community and collaboration among others. Argument thus becomes a means for inquiry, for exploring and developing an understanding of other people and other communities, rather than mere persuasion. In that same volume, John Gage sees the potential for argument to encourage the development of humane perspectives: "By unlinking argument from persuasion we can focus attention on the need to teach argumentative writing as part of an education that foregrounds respect and consideration of the ideas of others" (5). However, these attempts to move toward a definition of argument that is not solely based on persuasion are not without problems. Argument as understanding is often no more than a retooling of argument as persuasion for the postmodern world. Because we now value cultural concepts like community, collaboration, and understanding, argument is often refigured to fit those cultural goals. Yet, while the definition of argument has changed, the process and procedures by which argument is taught remain the same. In this vein, Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor offer one of the most telling claims: "Only classical rhetoric offers a complete, general art of argumentation that takes in the whole activity of discourse making, from the first stages of inquiry to the final stages of dissemination" (99). In short, while the reasons for teaching argument have been adapted to current cultural values, the actual methods of argumentation—methods often based on classical models—remain the same.

Williams' theories can be situated squarely in this trend toward upholding the significance of traditional argument, in that he attempts to apply the Toulmin model and traditional structures of persuasion to the Web. This is not to say that he might not see argument as beyond
persuasion—Williams does call argumentation “a social activity that brings individuals into conversation”—but his article relies heavily on Toulmin as the lens through which to think about persuasion on the Web (379). And while Toulmin is quite useful for analyzing arguments and for constructing text-based claims, the Web is not a text-based structure. Although we often think about the Internet as a textual medium where individuals connect in chat rooms and discussion groups, the Web is fast becoming less textually centered and more image conscious. While synchronous and asynchronous chat and discussion spaces might be analyzed in terms of argumentative methods, the rhetoric of visual and multimedia spaces represents a departure from traditional conceptions of discourse.⁵ Even textbooks are unclear as to whether argument is a distinct genre online. On their textbook Web site, Daniel Anderson, Bret Benjamin, and Bill Paredes-Holt say that “good online models of argumentation are often difficult to locate” since “not all the standards of traditional argumentation have translated to the more informal environment of the Internet.” While they acknowledge that the Internet is rapidly transforming our understanding of argument, they write, “Well-written hypertextual arguments should still support a claim with logical evidence and attempt to move the conversation forward. However, digital information, multimedia and hypertext all are complicating the way we think about logic, evidence, and conversation as they relate to argumentation.” Their comments reveal a profound perplexia about the relationships among argument, persuasion, and Web discourse. This perplexia is confounded by the fact that there are no longer discrete forms of Internet discourse; thus, images, text, and sound cannot be independently separated and analyzed for their rhetorical properties. Moreover, along with this move toward multimedia presentation comes a different conception of structure, which further complicates the application of traditional argument theory to Web-based communication. While Williams attempts to address how argument negotiates the specific attributes of network structure, he does so through examples from self-contained, student-developed hypertexts, not from actual Web-based structures. Perhaps Williams’ epigraph from Michael Joyce (“what we see as senseless beauty may be the emergence of as yet unrecognizable new ways of making sense”) does not refer to new ways of making arguments on the Web. Perhaps these new ways of making sense do not involve argument at all but emerge from the specific vocabulary, syntax, and potential for persuasion afforded by new media technologies.
The Impossibility of Argument

Key to Williams' claim for Web-based argumentation is the link's function as a persuasive device that can be used tactically by the writer to control meaning. Williams explains that individual links are argumentative "because they suggest to users ways to contextualize past information in terms of new information and thereby guide the users' construction of a temporal text" (393-94). While this claim may hold true in a self-contained argument hypertext, the link can have other uses on the Web. Jeff Parker has produced a taxonomy of various link types. He differentiates between functional links and links that convey literary effect; both types, however, include link strategies that attempt to invoke emotion or disorientation. For instance, the random link can be used when the writer wants to "instill a certain brand of astonishment and disorientation" in the reader. While Parker's article primarily addresses literary hypertexts, his classification scheme invites us to consider other rhetorical strategies that the link might accomplish. The proliferation of rhetorical possibilities for the link makes it impossible to isolate persuasion or argument as intentional. Similarly, intentionality is difficult if not impossible to discern online. Despite his attention to the user's choices in the persuasive process, Williams' continued use of the term "author" betrays a dependence on the notion of intentionality that allows him to apply the category of argument to webtexts. However, if the locus of agency for persuasion is unclear, then we cannot apply traditional argument theories to actual Web pages.

Simon Barker takes these observations to the extreme, in that he sees no possibility for argument in hypertext. He suggests that computer text has the power "to overwhelm readers with evidence, to present rather than argue." Rather than provide a logical argument with a coherent support structure, computer "texts" serve as examples of "informal communication." Barker defines argument as a structure that rests on formal relations between statements. In order to understand and read arguments, we must understand how those statements relate to one another. Since hypertext is based on network logic and not on linear structure, Barker claims, "computer text can make it difficult to determine the logical relationship between various statements, difficult to determine even which statements the author is making and which statements the author is merely linking to" (176). The lack of clear relationship between statements, between links, makes argument difficult to apply to hypertext since the purpose or intentions of the hypertext, would not be apparent. This is why Williams includes introductory and meta-commentary pages
in his hypothetical Web argument assignment. The pages allow the hypertext to form a cohesive structure that could correspond to argument, regardless of whether users actually read these pages.

From the perspectives of Williams and Barker, we might conclude that argument is found in the relationships between statements, in the rhetorical power of the linking structures that support and develop claims in written forms. Williams seems to support this idea in his insistence on the link as a persuasive device on the Web. But what about the function of visuals in Web arguments? Can visuals function as arguments? The Web is fast becoming a visual landscape, reflecting our visually conscious, media-saturated world. The proliferation of pop-up ads and one-screen visual statements calls into question the link as the vital persuasive device on the Web. A special issue of the journal *Argumentation and Advocacy* explores how visuals might function as persuasive arguments. Several theorists of visual argument assert that images cannot make arguments since they lack the structure of a formal argument, and, independent of language, images cannot function as arguments because our theories of argument are based on written language. Other theorists, however, argue the opposite: visual arguments are possible within images. J. Anthony Blair, for instance, claims that visual arguments are possible in principle, but in order to function as an argument, "the work of art has to satisfy the condition that we are able to identify its premise(s) and its intended conclusion (whether expressed or not)" (28). In short, the work of art must contain expressed propositional statements and those statements must function as a logical unit that presents an argument. One example that Blair provides is that of a Benetton magazine advertisement. He claims that this advertisement (and presumably other Benetton advertisements) functions as a purely visual argument. The ad consists of a series of three images (three two-page spreads), each of which functions, according to Blair, as a premise. From these three progressive premises, a conclusion can be drawn. Therefore, the ad functions as an argument because propositional statements are discernably expressed, and it is clear what conclusions the images seek to suggest. While it is clear that this ad can function as an argument, it is also important to note that Blair does not consider the context in which this ad is placed. He does tell us that it appeared in the *New Yorker*, and he does a nice job of emphasizing the readership of the magazine, but what is unclear is the placement of this ad. Was it placed immediately after a vacation or entertainment ad? Was it followed by an article that contradicts the ad’s main claims? This is the point at which it becomes clear that context is
important in the functioning of an argument. Applying the notion of argument to images, advertisements, television commercials, and especially digital media becomes increasingly difficult because we have no idea of the embeddedness of these arguments. We have no idea how previously visited sites will affect how we view an argument, nor can we predict how the juxtaposition of pages and images through links will affect persuasion. In short, we often lack knowledge of the rhetorical situation surrounding the digital image, as well as an understanding of how an argument might function when multiple media are involved.

Furthermore, the multimedia capabilities of the machine itself are a significant factor in the effects of any webtext on a user. The computer is a powerful mediating device through which we communicate with others, and any piece of discourse, argument or otherwise, takes on different properties when transmitted through a machine. If we take Williams' hypothetical argument assignment, for example, we might ask what happens to the argument's persuasive potential when it is viewed through a different browser or monitor, with an outdated computer, across platforms, or with varying processing speeds. Williams champions the link as a persuasive device, but in multimedia webtexts, bandwidth can function as an equally persuasive tool. Speed is rapidly becoming a persuasive factor, especially if we take into consideration the explosion of Flash movies and animation on the Web. In order to view these sites, users need DSL or other fast connections, making persuasion dependent on access. Only users who can view the site or have the required technology will be able to be persuaded or moved. Lanham refers to this phenomenon in terms of an economics of attention: "We have in the West a venerable tradition of studying how human attention is created and allocated: 'the art of persuasion' which the Greeks called rhetoric. A better definition of rhetoric, in fact, might be 'the economics of human attention-structures,' for whenever we 'persuade' someone, we do so by getting that person to 'look at things from our point of view,' share our attention-structure" (227). In Lanham's scenario, persuasion in an information economy would depend on user access and machinic capabilities. Thus, what it means to move someone, to persuade, would be based on the technological abilities of the machine.

In this case, movement takes on a double meaning in multimedia environments. Movement can function as a suasive device by taking the reader through the text using actual movement and speed. Whether that movement is achieved by push technology or by mouse clicks is significant because underneath lies a fundamental ontological difference about
the agency of the writer. Push technology seemingly provides greater autonomy to the composer, in that the individual has produced a composition that pushes or moves the user to or through ideas, images, and text. In some Web sites that employ push technology, there are points at which users can point and click, but these are often implemented in order to segment the code and distribute the information in smaller chunks. Dynamic HTML that uses scripting languages for Web sites executes commands or functions without the need for user interaction. Therefore, the writer can create a composition that allows the machine to push the reader through the text, so to speak. The user has no choices in this model. If we consider this act of movement persuasive, is the suasive agent the writer of the code or the machine itself? Lev Manovich suggests the latter when he describes what happens when users are waiting for sites to load: “In Web communication there is no human addresser, only a machine. So as the user keeps checking whether the information is coming, she actually addresses the machine itself. Or rather, the machine addresses the user. The machine reveals itself; it reminds the user of its existence—not only because the user is forced to wait but also because she is forced to witness how the message is being constructed over time” (206). Again we have a situation in which the speed of loading not only functions as a persuasive factor, but the machine provides a glimpse of the process by which it constructs the choices that it will make available to the user. For Manovich, then, more autonomy must be allocated to the machine than to the user. David Bolter and Richard Grusin build on the model of machinic autonomy by noting, “Computer programs may ultimately be human products, in the sense that they embody algorithms devised by human programmers, but once the program is written and loaded, the machine can operate without human intervention.” They go on to emphasize that programmers “seek to remove the traces of their presence in order to give the program the greatest possible autonomy” (27). If autonomous choice is seemingly absent from the purview of both users and programmers in some multimedia sites, argument becomes something very different when enacted by a machine.

If machines execute arguments, then the concept of argument on the Web does not occur through an outside author—already a highly contested and slippery term—but functions at the internal level of the code. The term “argument” means something very specific in complex coding systems; in computer code, argument operates as a variable. From this logic, machines make arguments all of the time. If we couple this machine logic with Williams’ theory about Web-based argumentation, argument
becomes something entirely different. For example, when we use the search engine Google to search the Web for images of masculinity, is the results page an argument? A Google results page provides a variety of links that, when read in the order that Google ranks them, will produce a certain meaning. Although Google is programmed to produce results in a particular manner, that programming is generally unknown to the user. Therefore, it could be claimed that Google, the bot, is arguing for a particular concept of a search term. While machine logic may have affinities with human logic, we need to consider the unique specificity of machinic arguments and how they transpose modes of persuasion. In this scenario, the machines persuade us to make choices, to choose links, while simultaneously constraining our choices. While I do not grant autonomy to the machine, we must not forget how the machine affects persuasive possibilities, especially if we consider some of the emerging behavior that is developing within software programs.

In place of argument terminology, we might look to the language of the medium itself for ideas about how to describe and program new ways to communicate productively. We must not be afraid to embrace a new rhetoric that takes into consideration the technological vocabulary and syntax of new media technologies. Michelle Shauf, for example, is fearful that

the art of rhetoric is not helping shape the content and form of multimedia artifacts but rather that new media technologies, and the considerable cognitive demands they place on composers, are instead subsuming entirely the practice of rhetoric. What we naturally see, then, is a distinctive pattern in multimedia composition with plenty of technical ambition (3-D modeling, sound, animation) but very little rhetorical ambition (hence the virtual nonexistence of electronic essays or arguments). This is because students approach electronic composition through the language of technology, not rhetoric. (36)

Rather than seeing the language of technology as distinct from rhetoric, we must start to see the intersections between the two vocabularies.

**The Failure of Argument**

What becomes clear in this discussion is that Williams depends on a notion of intentionality that allows him to apply the category of argument to webtexts. This intentionality becomes problematic when we look at the actual Web because things other than argument can happen when we link or use images. If forms of persuasion or argument do emerge, they don’t
fall into the categories of argument as we know them. While we can question whether argument is possible on the Web, and we can question who and what does the arguing, one larger issue looms prominently: argument fails us all of the time. While we teach students argument and vehemently defend its importance, argument fails. In place of argument, wars are fought, violence committed, vengeance inflicted. The events of September 11, 2001 were not arguments; they were statements. They were events; they were not arguments. For all of our conviction about arguments and the ability of arguments to accomplish understanding and mediation, they often fail to enact change. What we see all around us in contemporary culture is less the use of argument and more a pervasive enactment of the statement. Rather than structuring reasons or statements together to form an argument, individuals are relying on single statements to convey a message or idea. In short, argument has collapsed onto itself, and formal structures of argumentation have been flattened into singular statements. Thus, what we need to grasp is an emergent alternative to argument, which we understand to be equally or more persuasive but which reconfigures the structure of the statement for generative ends.

One possibility would be Geoff Sirc’s notion of composition as a “happening” or event, where we can “exploit the possibilities of our status, exposing students to a range of culturally valid forms as well as non-mainstream content; in so doing, we provide our audience with a host of possibilities for worlds and forms to inhabit” (267). In such an approach to composition, students might produce arguments if they are appropriate to the scenario for writing, but they might also produce other works that incorporate multimedia or otherwise press the boundaries of writing as we know it. This type of Web writing would be writing that “works minutely, from the inside out, to develop a statement” (274). By having students construct statements as generative rhetorical events rather than sustained arguments, I am not advocating eliminating argument from writing curricula; instead, we need to rethink how we teach students to approach writing on the Web and how we imagine Web writing’s potential. Consider this: there is plenty to suggest that the Web has become corporate and commercial. Will having students construct Web arguments change the corporate investment in the Web? Will Web arguments fundamentally alter the Web or the ways that people communicate with one another? Can we see examples where Web-based arguments have significantly changed our lives? I don’t think that we have, nor in all possibility will we. As David Kolb notes, “There is no reason to
think there is one essential or best way to use hypertext, any more than there is one essential or best way to use paper" (323). With this in mind, we might look to other disciplines—such as art, engineering, or graphic design—in order to discover new approaches to thinking about the technology of writing and about the communicative potential of the Web. Such an interdisciplinary focus might allow for the emergence of a new lexicon or vocabulary for persuasion on the Web, which in turn would force us to constantly rethink how rhetoric might be deployed and taught in ways that exceed the limits we construct for it.

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**Notes**

1. Informed by graphic design theories, both Anne Wysocki and Patricia Sullivan have made important contributions to the development of scholarship on visual rhetoric, but nowhere is this trend more evident than in the proliferation of textbooks that in corporate approaches to analyzing visual representations.

2. A number of critics have called for a move beyond argument as persuasion. For instance, Nathaniel Teich has made claims for argument defined as understanding rather than persuasion. Others have redefined argument as exploratory. Kenneth Burke sees argument as identification. Jean-François Lyotard defines it as the impossibility of common ground stemming from differing rules of evidence.

3. One of the reasons that I focus on the visual is the general move of all Internet discourse toward visual representation. Even usenet, chat, and e-mail forms of communication are graphically enhanced Web interfaces, proving that we can no longer think about forms of computer text in isolation from the image.

4. Williams is correct that in a self-contained hypertext, such as those constructed using Storyspace, it is possible to construct a secure and logical argument where the reader is directed through unidirectional pathways that build a cohesive argument; however, my concern here is with multimedia forms where the boundaries between multimedia pathways are not clearly defined.

5. David Fleming argues this point most vociferously: "First, a picture unaccompanied by language lacks the two-part conceptual structure of argument. Second, while it may be able to function as evidence, a picture is incapable of serving independently as an assertion" (15–16).

6. By push technology, I am referring to the means by which content is distributed in Web environments. Most users of Web sites pull their information from the site; that is, they go to the site and they "pull" off the information. Push technology—which includes XML, dynamic HTML scripting languages such as Flash and Javascript—allows the computer or Web site to push information to the user without user interaction. For example, stock tickers are one example of
push technology; the user doesn’t have to point and click to receive content. For
more information, see “Push.”

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Mother and Teacher: Subjectivity in “Unmotherhood”

Arabella Lyon

Women were busy bearing children, busy gathering edible grasses or bulbs. You see, he could have said, his little finger waving, it comes down to biology and destiny. Women have been hampered by their biology. Hampered: such a neutral and disingenuous concept and one that deflects blame.

—Carol Shields