The New Media Writer as Cartographer

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Abstract

With the advent of GPS-enabled mobile writing devices such as smart phones and tablets, writing has become invested with a new power to express place—both through the geo-coding of one’s writing location and through the presentation of place-based research on customized digital maps. This essay argues that teachers of writing must learn to accommodate and exploit these new and developing digital modalities while also making students aware of the theoretical and lived implications of digital cartographies. The essay first reviews several digital mapping projects that force their users to reconsider standard notions of place and indexicality. The essay then outlines a curriculum for teaching digital mapping in a composition-rhetoric course and presents successful examples of student work.

Keywords: technology; computers and writing; cartography; maps; mapping; cognitive mapping; indexicality; place

As I write this, I am sitting on a subway car crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, typing into an iPad perched on my thighs. To my left, a teenager stands, typing a message into his cell phone; on my right, an elderly woman sits, annotating her eBook reader. Now that the train has emerged from its underground passage onto the bridge, my BlackBerry comes online and vibrates, alerting me to a message from my editor reminding me of the deadline for this article. Tucking the iPad under my arm, I use my thumbs to type a response.

Could the lesson of this scene be any clearer? In 2011, technology affects not just how we write—accelerating the pace, adding distractions—but also where we write, expanding the place of writing in ways that were scarcely imaginable even ten years ago. While stylus and paper have been a portable writing technology for centuries, never before has it been possible to write, revise, and publish so quickly from virtually any location on the globe. Furthermore, the cameras and Global Positioning System-enabled technologies tethered to these devices promise new ways of extending alphabetic writing into visual and even cartographic media. From the vantage point of 2011, it looks extremely likely that new writing technologies will continue to change not only the place of writing but also the writing of place, allowing students to represent the environment and the world with unprecedented fidelity.

Or is this only an illusion of fidelity? While GPS may promise to make writing more indexical—anchoring a blog post or photograph to satellite-determined geographical coordinates—it is not so much a scientific accuracy as merely one more aspect of rhetoric that can be manipulated; for example, I was able to use the tropes of geographical location to fabricate the opening scene of this essay. That’s right: pure fiction. As I write this paragraph, or, rather, rewrite it, I

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am not on the subway at all, but rather a coffee shop in the East Village of Manhattan. Next week, I may rewrite parts of this essay in my office, home, or library. Considering that writing is inevitably a recursive process, can we ever truly locate the when and where of writing? Jacques Derrida and others have made clear that writing always involves, and attempts to compensate for, the absence from the scene of enunciation. While the place-based writing technologies and interfaces I examine in this essay attempt to compensate for this fundamental anxiety about the time and place of writing, they do not solve the problem any more readily than traditional alphabetic text. The rhetoric of place always possesses the ability to mislead the reader, no matter the technological mediation supporting it.

1. Mobile writing technologies and the rhetoric of place

At the very least, new writing technologies succeed in focusing much-needed attention back on the rhetoric of place, a lacuna in the instruction of writing and rhetoric that needs to be repaired now that writing has become much more spatialized through its movement from the static vertical page to the often-moving horizontal screen. The rhetoric of place was not always overlooked. Think back to Aristotle’s poetics, in which the dramatic unities of place and action were as important as the unity of time. Rhetoric, too, was once equally concerned with presenting a convincing representation of place. As ecocritical scholar Timothy Morton (2007) noted, “[r]hetoric used to have a whole panoply of terms for . . . ecomimesis,” the umbrella term Morton uses for rhetorics of location (p. 33). Description of land was known as geographia, while topographia was the description of place, and chorographia was the rhetoric of nation, to name just three of the modes in this taxonomy (Morton, 2007, p. 33). Questions about geographic rhetoric are neither new nor unique to digital writing. Digital writing technologies, however, have foregrounded the rhetoric of place, promising to provide fuller and more indexical representations of place at the same moment when—in the Internet, on Second Life <http://secondlife.com/>, and in gaming culture—the boundary between real and virtual worlds grows less distinct.

Mobile writing technologies are themselves instrumental in confusing these boundaries. GPS-enabled devices have, on the one hand, led to a hyperawareness of real-world location and an efflorescence of related map interfaces to support geo-coded photography and writing. But at the same time, smart phones and writing tables refract and multiply the actual place of writing into virtual dislocation. Consider, for example, the default setting on many mobile writing devices: “This email was sent from my BlackBerry” (or iPhone or whatever brand of device used). Ostensibly an apology for misspellings, omissions, and curtness, this message does not so much communicate one’s location as much as it conveys dislocation—from the office, if not from the work of the office, which is no longer confined to a single place, but now envelops us in an omnipresent swarm of emails and media alerts. (It is also, of course, stealth advertising for the device itself.) To declare that one is mobile is not tantamount to declaring one’s geographical position; indeed, removing the default message is often a tactic used to efface one’s writing location entirely. By responding quickly to an email, a worker may appear to be productively situated at a desk when she is, in fact, anywhere but. Such tactics allow users of technology to momentarily evade systems of discipline at the same time that they feed back into a logic of panoptic surveillance, where the ability to respond to correspondence is internalized as a kind of disciplining apparatus. Ironically, we covet devices that signify not just technological literacy and elitism, but perhaps also a kind of enslavement to the logic of corporate productivity.

2. Digital maps and indexicality

Rather than dismiss such devices out of a Foucauldian paranoia, in this essay I want to distinguish the particular affordances of such mobile writing technologies and the interfaces that accompany them. If mobile devices to some extent obfuscate the rhetoric of place, they also support a counter-impulse to make writing more indexical (however illusory that indexicality may be). Coeval with the proliferation of smart phones and writing tablets has been a concomitant increase in the use of digital maps as a ground and medium for writing. The popularity is evident in the widespread use of Google Maps <http://maps.google.com> and Google Earth <http://www.google.com/earth/index.html>, in the map interfaces of popular software applications like iPhoto, and even in the sense of travel and spatial organization of the popular presentation tool Prezi <http://prezi.com/>, in which the presenter or reader zooms across the writing surface as if it were a literal map of the topic. The introduction and availability of online mapping applications have
opened up the possibility of every writer, including the composition student, to explore ways of writing other than the traditional linear argument in alphabetic text. This turn to a spatial representation of argument rather than a linear argument—of which Prezi is a prime example—is a reflection of the mass cultural move from relying upon a codex information storage system, in which a linear argument is the dominant form of storage, toward forms of argument that reflect and exploit database-driven forms of writing. Prezi marries the traditional narrative argument with the spatially-based presentation of the screen interface or the map.

I will return to this tension between narrative and spatially-based writing again at the end of the essay. First, however, I want to explain the term “indexical,” and explore what the implications are for digital writing. Indexicality is the modality of semiotics in which a sign points to some real-world referent or cause; smoke, for example, is an index of fire. The medium that has most successfully (although not unproblematically) laid claim to being indexical is photography, with its claim to document the real world with some measure of accuracy: this is what Paris looked like at the turn of the century; this is how Hiroshima looked after the detonation of the atomic bomb. Ironically, the current trend to cartographically render this indexicality (more on this below) has occurred at a moment when photography, in its digitized and easily reproducible and circulated form, has been delegitimized as a window on the world. Recall how in 2008 a photograph of an Iranian missile launch was released by Sepah News, the media arm of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, and it subsequently ran on the front pages of many European and North American newspapers and news sites, including BBC News and NYTimes.com. Soon after, it was discovered that the photograph was digitally altered to mask one of the missile’s failure to launch.

And so it may be that a new awareness of digital media’s ability to misrepresent the world has resulted in a compensatory impulse toward making photography and writing more apparently indexical and grounded, if not real. The practice of geo-coding photography, in which GPS coordinates are used to locate media on a customizable digital map, is evident not just in Google Maps—which allows users to customize maps with photography, commentary, and reviews—but also in applications like Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com/>) and software such as iPhoto. These applications began with interfaces that were based on the codex album and the Microsoft PowerPoint slideshow, and they now both contain map interfaces. Even the latest release of Apple’s native filmmaking software, iMovie 09, includes a function that allows users to zoom from one area of the globe to another, in a movement no doubt inspired by Google Earth’s missile-eye view of the world. At a moment when many prognosticators worry about the ways that technology removes people from the world (marooning teenagers in front of a computer screen instead of outdoors, for instance), there is a compensatory impulse to ground digital activity, and especially digital publishing, in the world—or, at least, in representations of it. While travel photography was the first genre subject to this mapping impulse, digital writing, too, has increasingly been represented cartographically. For instance, on the Web site Yelp (<http://www.yelp.com/>), reviews of restaurants, clothing stores, parks, and their like are geographically located on a map interface built on top of the application programing interface of Google Maps (which itself has begun aggregating reviews from disparate Web sites and making them available in searches).

But the use of Google Maps isn’t just limited to commercial ventures. Researchers, journalists, and creative nonfiction writers have also utilized the new availability of the map as a writing interface. One example is a Google Maps essay by Dinty W. Moore, in which he recalls his adolescent and young adult journeys of accidentally stalking George Plimpton across four different cities. Each humiliating episode is indexed to a different point on the map, with meetings and run-ins at the airport denoted by Google Map’s built-in airplane icon (see Fig. 1). More ambitious and more ostensibly indexical is the project undertaken by Walt and Kip Jones, who documented their retirement travels through the Northwest Passage on a geo-coded blog. Inspired by the “real-time” Google Maps’ implementation of an around-the-world boat race, their son, Randy Jones, set up a WordPress blog (<http://wordpress.com/>) for his parents travels supported by a geomashup plug-in written by Dylan Kuhn (which is still available for download as of this writing). Every blog post and photograph corresponds to a point on the map, reflecting the ship’s coordinates during the writing, gleaned from the boat’s GPS-enabled chart blotted (see Fig. 2). Due to weather conditions and the resulting spottiness of satellite bandwidth, the writing was not as automatically and authentically indexical as the interface would leave the reader to believe. The Jones’ son actually plotted many of the points manually and even adjusted coordinates on the map which appeared to place the Jones on firm land. As Randy Jones noted to me, “We felt it was more important for site visitors to see them in the water, so we altered the position in these cases” (personal communication, July 9, 2009). Less important than actual indexicality is the persuasive appearance of cartographic truth. Maps are indeed more rhetorical than we care to realize; while they purport to be objective representations of the world, they are really arguments about it, reflecting the political and economic motives of those who “write” the map.
Fig. 1. “Mr. Plimpton’s Revenge” by Dinty W. Moore.

Fig. 2. This Google Map interface shows the path taken by the Motor Vessel Geraldine, as well as all blog posts and photographs en route, which have been geo-coded and correspond to the blue and white pointers (Geraldine).
Teaching the rhetoric of maps

It was just such an insight about the rhetorical nature of maps that inspired a course I taught in 2009 at the University of Michigan, entitled Mapping New Media. The course was inspired by the aforementioned projects, but also by questions about the power of digital mapping to represent and, in some ways, limit our apprehension of place. I designed a number of activities, ostensibly to teach students to use digital mapping tools like Google’s My Maps to represent place-based research, but also to instill in them the skills necessary to read critically the rhetoric of place. In designing this class, I was interested to see how I might wed existing genres of academic writing—analysis and research—to burgeoning modes of digital writing that were not yet defined as a genre. After a sequence of technological tutorials, shorter projects, and visual rhetorical analyses, students were encouraged in their final projects to choose a topic of their own devising and to design a Web site that in some way used mapping as a heuristic in the analysis or representation of information.

My interest in using mapping as a research heuristic was not just in response to recent digital initiatives. An important model I shared with students was a discussion of John Snow’s 1854 cholera map of London, discussed in Edward Tufte’s (1990) classic of visual rhetoric and design, Envisioning Information (see Fig. 3). In this life-saving example of information design, Snow mapped data about cholera infections, rather than merely depend on synchronic representations of statistics. What Snow discovered about the location of the infection—that it was tied to a pump

Fig. 3. Black bars plotted on John Snow’s cholera map of London represent deaths from cholera while circles represent water pump-wells. The shaded circular overlay (added by the author) indicates the infected Broad Street Pump, which is surrounded by the highest concentration of cholera deaths. (Image source: Snow, 1855.)
house source of drinking water—had a decisive effect on both curtailing the spread of this particular cholera outbreak and on identifying the etiology of the disease.

Snow’s map was a sophisticated instance of what I wanted students to do in the class as a final project: to take an existing map and use it to represent and organize their own writing in some illuminating way. I wanted to teach students more than technological skills and more than visual rhetoric. Above all, I wanted to teach them to be critical thinkers, and to be as concerned as I was with the opportunities and rhetorical affordances of cartographic representation—which largely means interrogating the illusion of facticity that maps offer their readers. Despite the non-discipline-specific, ostensibly topic-less nature of our course, I did want students to interrogate the map as a historical genre of writing with a history, ideology, and rhetoric of its own. To accomplish this, I held an early class session in the University of Michigan’s Map Library, a resource that other instructors can successfully simulate by using Internet resources and illustrated books about mapping available in most college and community libraries. At the Map Library, Librarian Timothy Utter displayed a selection from the history of maps, many of which were facsimile representations, but which, in their errors and omissions, nevertheless gave students a sense that the maps were not scientifically accurate but often speculative and ideologically-motivated arguments about the world. One example is the 13th-century Psalter Map, which clearly reflects its Christian ideology not only in terms of visual embellishment but also in its overall design, in which Christ, head and torso poised above the map, reigns over the circular world, with Jerusalem occupying the exact center like an omphalos (see Fig. 4).

Although this example of a “T-O” map (so named for the shape of the continental landmass within its medallion-like container) might seem to be a particularly extreme case of symbolism informing and superseding fact, I wanted students to consider the notion that all maps, like all forms of writing, are rhetorical. Nedra Reynolds explored this idea, drawing on geographer John Brian Harley’s “Deconstructing the Map”:

[R]hetoric is part of the way all texts work and... all maps are rhetorical texts... All maps state an argument about the world, and they are propositional in nature. All maps employ the common devices of rhetoric such
as invocations of authority. This is especially so in topographical maps... Rhetoric may be concealed but it is always present. (as cited in Reynolds, 2004, p. 242)

A classic example of this, which has garnered mention in sources ranging from Susan de la Grange’s (2007) essay on visual rhetoric in the reader Rhetorical Visions to an episode of the television show The West Wing (2001), is the distortion of the Mercator Projection, which has become the standard way that our spherical planet is represented in two-dimensional space.

Invented by the German cartographer and engraver Gerardus Mercator in 1569, the Mercator Projection, with its rectilinear lines of longitude and latitude, allowed sailors to draw and follow a straight line between geographical points. Although a great boon for navigation, the Mercator Projection greatly magnifies and misrepresents the size of the landmasses at the southern and especially the northern pole, such that Greenland appears to be the same size as the continent of Africa, even though it is approximately sixteen times smaller. Thus a map that has been used to support colonial expansion reflects with discomforting ease the biases of empire: that the Northern Provinces dominate and assume greater significance than the Southern Latitudes. Other projections have been tendered, such as the Peter Projection, which distorts the shapes of the continents in order to more-accurately represent the relative sizes of their landmasses (this is, in fact, the projection suggested to replace the Mercator in that farcical scene on The West Wing); and the Upside Down Map, while also based on the Mercator Projection, simply attempts to redress the Northern Latitude biases of many of our most commonly used maps, by orienting South as “up,” thus placing Antarctica and the Antipodes at the top of the map, and the Arctic Circle at the bottom (images of these alternate projections can easily be found online). Despite widespread awareness of the ideological biases of these centuries-old projections, Google still uses the Mercator Projection as the basis for the Google Maps interface (see Fig. 5).

To reinforce with my students the lesson that all maps are rhetorical, I asked them to perform a rhetorical analysis of a map they found and photographed in the Map Library, answering a number of questions about their chosen map: What purpose does the map serve? What is its tone? What are its biases? It was my hope that by examining the more
apparent rhetoric and ideology of these older maps, students would begin to see how their own maps—or even the Google Maps they were using to compose their map compositions—might contain the same biases. How does a map created with Google Maps establish its authority? By its impressive, technologically advanced, scalar precision? By its interactivity and modularity? Finally, what does the map not show, and how are these omissions significant?  

The students’ second class assignment emerged out of this map rhetorical analysis. Having analyzed how choices about color, typography, and scale can support the map’s tone, stance, and authority, the students then put into practice what they learned, making maps of their own design—or at least using maps of a borrowed design that would afford them more visual and rhetorical freedom than what was offered by the pre-formatted Google Maps. The work of pictorial map-artist Jo Mora served as one inspiration, as was Dinty W. Moore’s Google Maps essay about George Plimpton. The purpose of the map-essay assignment was not so much to produce a technically perfect design; at that point, I had only given students a single fast-and-furious Adobe Photoshop tutorial and a few basic gestalt design principles on figure-ground relationships. Rather, the goal was for students to match, or attempt to match, their chosen topic to an appropriately expressive visual theme. One student’s map-essay, on historical landmarks of Chicago, used a historical map of the city as well as a complementary antiqued color palette, art deco-style typeface, and subtle contrasts between figure and ground to locate and describe various historical Chicago landmarks. Tashween Ali’s map-essay on the Richard Linklater film Before Sunrise rendered a map of Vienna, where the film takes place, in black and white, so that the film scenarios she isolated—each keyed to a different location in the city—emerged more forcefully (see Fig. 6). Another goal was for students to experiment and see how writing arranged cartographically might differ from

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1 Because of the time constraints involved in this seven-week, one-credit-hour class, I focused my technological instruction almost exclusively on the use of Google Maps, a free and customizable platform that, along with other digital mapping platforms, promises a certain democratization of cartography, as both geographer Mark Monmonnier (2010) and art historian Hannah Higgins (2009) have suggested in their discussions of this new digital era of mapping. Higgins in particular ratifies and extends the discussion of cartographic rhetoric with which I began this essay in her meditation on the democratizing potential of online mapping:

> [M]apping is a mechanism for developing a worldview. Historically, this view has been determined to a large extent by the demands of governments, religion, or political reformers, large centralized authorities for which maps have a homogenizing function. . . . [N]ew technologies, by contrast, express worldviews driven by all manner of individual concerns. (96)

While the projects that my students undertook in class were indeed guided by individual concerns, it is important to be mindful about the ways that such purportedly democratic Web 2.0 applications are nevertheless underwritten by corporate concerns that also express a worldview. By plotting map points and filling those points with their data, students are on the one hand personalizing their maps; but they are also making their information, preferences, and even their locations part of the searchable and commercialized archive from which Google earns its profits. It is impossible yet to know how the information and labor my class provided to Google without compensation will ultimately be used and perhaps monetized. By teaching students how to use Google Maps for research, was I inadvertently teaching them to become uncritical consumers of corporate media?

One way I addressed such a concern was by posing the question itself to the class. In doing so, my hope was to teach students to become critical readers of visual writing—and of the tools used to create and consume such writing—in much the way that I ask my composition students to be aware of the potential biases of the essays we read and of the research they conduct independently.
standard forms of linear and chronological essay writing. Ali’s map-essay accomplished this by arranging scenes out of order, and in doing so, raised questions about sequence and geographic believability. Could the narrative, as filmed, have realistically occurred given the geographic disparity of the shooting locations?

4. Student case study: Map as heuristic

Similar questions guided a particularly interesting final project for the class: Bailey Rosser’s “Mapping Mulholland Drive.” Because of the larger scope and time frame afforded in the final project, Rosser was able to pose these questions using a number of different heuristic approaches that not only illuminated her subject, but also cast provocative reflections on the subject of our class. For her final project, Rosser used Google Maps in a way similar to Edward Snow’s use of a map of the Broad Street area of London, as a tool for discovery and analysis. Interestingly, the conclusion Rosser reached about the parallel dislocations of new media and film resemble those made by Lev Manovich (2000) in his exemplary The Language of New Media. While the Internet brings with it radical changes to economies, habits, and consciousness, it is easy to forget the similar changes wrought upon modern life by the previous technologies on which Internet technologies are founded: film, photography, and, stretching back not centuries but millennia, the technology of writing. No less than new media, these technologies continue to mold and, in the case of David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive, warp our perception of the world. Specifically, Rosser was interested in how her own sense of dislocation, experienced as a new arrival to Los Angeles, mirrored those experienced by the character Diane Selwyn in Mulholland Drive. More critically, Rosser used Google Maps to track how Lynch himself effects geographic dislocation in his mise-en-scène. Using Google Maps to track where Lynch’s narrative and shooting locations diverge and converge, Rosser showed how Lynch created his own geography and, in the process, made a powerful visual and rhetorical argument about Los Angeles (see Fig. 7).

On another page of her final project, entitled “Mapping the Characters,” Rosser embedded a separate Google Map to question whether the fictional residences of Lynch’s characters were consonant with the socioeconomic and demographic profiles of their real-world locations. Was it believable that the downtrodden Diane Selwyn would live in West Hollywood? (No, but the shooting location of Echo Park made more sense.) Discovering and revealing these distortions, Rosser revealed how Lynch’s film offers us a conceptual geography—a world of his own making—that is convincing despite its departures from real-world Los Angeles. This was a lesson that Rosser first learned during the class’ visit to the Map Library; after our visit, she explained that, while looking at the variety of representations, she realized that “maps are subjective.” Such critical thinking about the ways that representations affect and, in some ways, create our realities is exactly what I wanted students to gain from the course and apply to their own subsequent encounters with technology, regardless of the medium.
5. Cognitive maps

If Rosser’s thesis sounds familiar, it could be because it connects uncannily well with Kevin Lynch’s seminal text *The Image and the City* (1960), in which Lynch discusses the importance of an environment’s “imageability” to its residents (p. 9). It is important for residents to be able to develop and hold a “mental map” of their surroundings (p. 88)—a situation that, for Los Angeles, is particularly difficult because of its sprawl and perceived “decentralization” (p. 33). The specific irony of this for Rosser (and, indeed, for that other Lynch, moviemaker David Lynch) is that as much as Los Angeles makes it difficult to conceptualize the city geographically, it is the seat of the image-making complex that makes U.S. urban culture legible to itself and to cultures around the world. The skyline of Manhattan would not be half as famous as it is without the image-making powers of its West Coast cousin, Hollywood.

As Rosser’s project suggests, Kevin Lynch’s argument about an environment’s “legibility” and the resulting ability of its citizens to form mental maps also pertains to digital cartography and GPS technology (p. 9). The first difference, however, is that Google Maps and digital cartography extend well beyond the confines of Lynch’s eponymous city in making suburban and rural areas as equally legible to inhabitants (at least those fortunate to be able to afford access to the technology). But while the GPS technology available in Google Maps certainly increases the legibility of more environments (and at a greater variety of scales) than ever before, this increased digital legibility has not, as Kevin Lynch might expect, facilitated the ability of digital citizens to produce mental maps. In fact, the opposite may be true. In an article in the Canadian general interest magazine *The Walrus*, entitled “Global Impositioning Systems,” reporter Alex Hutchinson discussed the work of cognitive scientists who study patients with limited ability to form “cognitive maps,” and are thus disabled in their navigation skills; one exceptional patient is unable to deviate from her daily routes home by so much as a block for fear of becoming irredeemably lost. These scientists have been able to pinpoint the area of the brain responsible for cognitive maps—the hippocampus—which is significantly less developed in patients suffering from cognitive mapping disabilities (and correspondingly larger in the case of, say, London cab drivers). Because of the way that we interact (or fail to interact) with our environment, these scientists’ research has also shown that the increased use of digital navigation devices, such as a car’s GPS system or a smart phone’s Google Maps application, may lead to the atrophy of users’ abilities to form these cognitive maps, because the digital maps are doing the work for them.

6. Map as interface: Learning to navigate a virtual future

Of course, every technology upon which we become dependent—the technology of writing no less than the technology of digital mapping—restructures our brain and the way it handles information. And while teaching old-fashioned navigation skills or even worrying about the deleterious effects of technology may seem far from the bailiwick of writing teachers, it is our concern to teach literacy. The new prevalence of digital cartography, as well as the mobile reading and writing behaviors that go along with it, certainly do present challenges to traditional literacy. But they also provide opportunities for forward-thinking writing teachers to extend rhetoric into a multi-modal space and, furthermore, to connect students’ increasing comfort in virtual worlds to real world rhetorical situations.

In some ways, the current prevalence of the map-as-interface may merely be a symptom of our confusion and concern as we immerse ourselves more and more in virtual worlds. The map-interface functions as a corrective reminder that our online activities must be tethered to real-world activities. But I would argue that the map-interface is also prevalent—and indeed will be useful to writing teachers of the future—because it is one alternative model of presenting information in a non-linear format, which is increasingly important in this digital age where the database has superseded narrative as the primary method for information storage and transmission. In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich (2000) discusses the tension in emergent new media writing between traditional narrative forms and the new database-driven models of information delivery. The digital writing formats that have arisen since Manovich’s discussion can be placed on different positions on this narrative–database spectrum: while the blog is more apparently narrative, like a diary in reverse chronological order, the information it contains can be reformatted using tags to exploit the recombinant capabilities of the database. On the other hand, the interface design of a wiki, which is designed to support the search of its archives, more-openly mimics and utilizes the power of the database structuring it. Since both of these genres are relatively new, it is quite likely that they will both be superseded by new forms of digital writing organization, for which instruction in both traditional narrative argumentation and a rhetoric of place will be equally important.
Why is developing a rhetoric of place necessary to meet the demands of the writing classroom of the future? As literacy adapts to the digital age, writing teachers will need to adapt their thinking about rhetoric beyond the codex and its typically linear narrative toward the dominant information delivery method of screen-based reading: the interface. As Gregory Ulmer notes in his book *Heuretics* (1994), “Hypermedia, in the electronic apparatus, requires a radically different commitment to space from that of the book” (p. 35-36). Ulmer goes on to argue that networked and associational information systems—which are even more networked and dematerialized in the age of “cloud computing” than they were in 1994—require new approaches for representing the “place” of writing. To some degree, maps participate in the indexicality typical of narrative writing and argumentation, which Ulmer sees as outmoded in the digital age. However, like an interface, a map is a non-linear form of representation and thus allows for multiple points of access and path-making through a field of information. Furthermore, in emphasizing the spatial aspects of writing rather than the chronological aspects of writing, maps may help students think about how the digitalization of new media fundamentally restructures the “place” of rhetoric. As both the interface and the rhetoric of the interface continue to develop in these emergent years of digital writing, it makes sense to begin by teaching a form of multimodal spatial writing that has already been subject to centuries of development and study: the map. In my experience, studying the rhetoric of maps effectively rehearsed students in later concepts of rhetoric—tone, audience, purpose—as well as visual rhetoric necessary for the crafting of their final Web site interfaces which contained Google Maps, but were also themselves, in some sense, a hierarchized map of information.

Perhaps most importantly, beginning my multimodal composition course with a study of maps helped students reflect on the place of writing, and not just as it was represented indexically, as a pointer on a map. In pondering the implications of writing in real and virtual environments, students began to question how forms of representation can connect us and disconnect us from the world. In the next ten years, as writing and reading become more mobile and untethered, it is crucial for the teachers of rhetoric to remind students that the place of writing—what in classical rhetoric Aristotle described as “that in which a plurality of oratorical reasonings coincide”—(as cited in Ulmer, 1994, p. 33)—is still a crucial aspect for the crafting of rhetorical arguments. Precisely because the future of new media writing is unknown, it is all the more important to turn to the history of place-based writing as a way to guide us to that new horizon.

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Further reading


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