

The Design of Web 2.0: The Rise of the Template, The Fall of Design

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Abstract

In a time when Web 2.0 technologies dominate web experiences, and when the media by and large sings the praises of the personal empowerment afforded by such technologies, it is important to bring a critical lens to the design of Web 2.0. Although there are many empowering and engaging features of user-driven content, this article explores the downside to template-driven design. Through tracing the decline of homepage web authoring (where users had control of visual design choices) alongside the rise of social networking sites (where users have little to no control over the visual design of their representation), I call for a renewed attention to the rhetoric of design.

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1. Introduction

My web developer husband calls me technologically stubborn. In 1998, I proudly showed him my very first homepage, composed dutifully in Netscape Composer. The following weekend I found myself on an all-but-mandatory date in the computer lab, where he very patiently taught me Photoshop and HTML. “But it works in Composer!” I stubbornly whined, yet after a few hours creating designs and carefully laying them out in tables, I was hooked. I felt powerful creating my own designs, and for the first time ever I felt technologically literate.

Six years after our HTML date, he again dragged me kicking and screaming to the world of web standards. “But tables work just fine!” I pouted, clinging to my Photoshop slice tool and mess of <td> tags. He handed me a copy of Jeffrey Zeldman’s (2003) *Designing with Web Standards*, and after a resistant reading I realized he was right—if I was to do any service to my web design students, I needed to learn (X)HTML and CSS. Again, very patiently, my husband taught me how to relearn web design. This relearning was far more challenging than the move from a web editor to code in large part because, for me, the split between form (the design, what the CSS manages) and content (the words and images, what the HTML manages) was antithetical to the way I conceptualized web design.

In Web 2.0 this split is a forgone conclusion. While I have relearned web design in order to conform to standards, and while I understand the reasons for the change, I am still troubled by Web 2.0’s tendency to render form standardized and invisible. It is my intention, then, to encourage those of us using and teaching in the spaces of Web 2.0 to rethink the ways in which we might bring design to a discursive level, for while we might be losing the means of production, this should not keep us from questioning and embracing design’s potential. Through describing the rhetorical functions of interface design—particularly MySpace and Facebook—this paper argues that, in a Web 2.0 world, composition teachers need to engage, along with our students, the work of design.

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2. Seamless technology: The death of the homepage

Digitally speaking, I came of age in an era—the mid-to-late 1990s—where those studying digital technologies were also designing and coding their own homepages. Additionally, computers and composition scholars in particular paid close attention to the connections between writing and coding. Consider, for example, the 1999 special issue of *Computers and Composition*, “From Codex to Code: Programming and the Composition Classroom,” which called attention to these connections, for as editors Ron Fortune and Jim Kalmbach noted, “New methods of software construction will bring with them new ways of writing applications and, as this happens, questions regarding the relationship between the processes involved in this kind of writing and traditional writing will become more persistent” (p. 324). In the same issue, Joel Haefner (1999) argued, “English instructors in computer-supported classrooms need to know something about the context and the neuromancers of the code” (p. 337). Although these claims remain theoretically important, it seems fewer and fewer English instructors know how to code, much less how to write applications. Our students are no different.

In thinking over the vast changes Web 2.0 has ushered forward (or, perhaps, that we have ushered forward through Web 2.0), I decided to ask a classroom of thirty-five 18- to 22-year-old Rhetoric and Professional Writing majors the question, “Who owns a homepage?” The silence was deafening. It was as though I had asked, “who uses a typewriter to compose their essays?” or “who calls their parents on a rotary-phone land line?”

In spite of this deafening silence, the lack of homepages in no way indicates, as we all know, a lack of internet usage or web presence. For students of the Net Generation (loosely those born between 1982–2000), Web 2.0 is woven into the fabric of their lives. Reynol Junco and Jeanna Mastrodicasa (2007) surveyed 7,705 college students in the United States and found that for most of our students, computer technology is a given: 97% own a computer, 97% have downloaded music and other media using peer-to-peer file sharing, and 76% use instant messaging and social networking sites. Their lives don’t start and stop on or offline; instead, their lives are woven throughout—the transition between the two is seamless.

Most of our large-scale learning goals acknowledge the prevalence of online technologies in our students’ lives (see, for example, the CCCC (2004) *Position Statements on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments*, the CCCC (2007) *Position Statement on the Multiple Uses of Writing*, or the NCTE (2008) *Policy Research Brief on Writing in a Changing World*). But it is important to keep in mind that just because technology is seamlessly woven into their lives does not mean that they are technologically savvy. As one student smartly analogized to me, “Just because I can drive a car doesn’t mean I can fix one.” The more seamless and invisible the technology becomes, the less we tend to know about how it works. As our students’ lives become more seamlessly enmeshed with the Internet, the less they know about web development.

Though in 1999 Alan Rea and Doug White claimed, “Sooner or later most Web users want to become Web writers” (1999, p. 421), today being a Web writer does not mean creating a homepage, and it certainly doesn’t mean understanding how servers, the Internet, (X)HTML, and CSS work. Trace the decline of once-popular web hosting services such as Angelfire and Geocities alongside the rise of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace¹ and it becomes clear—for our students, the homepage has gone the way of the landline.

3. The rise of social networking and “the post”

Social networking, loosely defined as an online service allowing users to create an online profile and build communities, by no means comprises all of what is Web 2.0. It is, however, its largest manifestation. Social networking embodies some key components of Web 2.0: the Web as platform, the Web as participation, and the Web as collaboration. Popular media has heralded Web 2.0 as a movement that empowers citizens to make themselves seen and heard in online spaces. Acknowledging this democratizing potential of Web 2.0, *Time* named its 2006 Person of the Year “you.” Meanwhile, in an April 2006 cover story, *Newsweek* writers Steven Levy and Brad Stone described Web 2.0

¹ In June 1997, GeoCities was the fifth most popular site on the Web (Wikipedia). By December 2008, GeoCities didn’t even rank in the top-100 (Alexa, 2008). GeoCities’ sharpest decline was seen between January 2005 and August 2006, when its market share fell from 0.25% of “all categories” based on visits to 0.10%. During those same twenty months, MySpace’s market share rose from 0.40% to 4.88% (Madden & Fox, 2006). A Google Trends search of “MySpace” or “Facebook” in contrast with “GeoCities,” “Web Hosting,” or “Domain Name” shows inversely proportional traffic—as social networking rises, the homepage falls.

as a movement that harnesses “the Internet’s ability to empower citizens” (para. 2). This empowerment in large part comes from the way in which Web 2.0 treats the Web—as Tim O’Reilly and John Battelle argued at the first Web 2.0 Conference in 2004—as platform. Web users who want an online presence do not need to code a web site or even use a WYSIWYG program; instead, the “web as platform” allows them to post a profile to MySpace or Facebook, or post a blog in LiveJournal or Blogger, or post their pictures in Flickr.

For the majority of Net Generation users, “the post” has replaced “web authoring.” Users post within preformatted templates designed by the site’s creators. In the late 1990s, creating a web page through either hand coding or a WYSIWYG program necessarily included choices of how and if to incorporate graphics, colors, fonts, sounds, and hyperlinks. Today, our students still choose photographs, words, sounds, and hyperlinks (clearly all rhetorical choices), but they choose colors, fonts, and shapes less and less. Instead, the platform, or more specifically the design template, is chosen for them. Those of us engaged with digital rhetoric continue to acknowledge the need to allow students to, in Rea and White’s terms, “experiment with new forms of writing,” (p. 421) but we need to acknowledge and engage with the fact that new forms of writing in Web 2.0 often exclude design insofar as design is, as I define it, the purposeful choice and arrangement of page elements. Though our students may choose a template in Blogger, Bebo, or MySpace with preformatted colors, fonts, and shapes, they rarely have the opportunity to create these choices for themselves.

4. The shape of Web 2.0: Form/content

In some ways, my (X)HTML and CSS date with my husband prepared me for a new world of web development where form and content are treated separately. In my case, however, I was learning how to control both the form *and* the content. In spite of being coded in separate files, the form and content found their way together again, and I made my own rhetorical choices as to how this melding would appear. What my (X)HTML and CSS date did not prepare me for was the onslaught and impact of the web-as-platform, where the only thing most users have control over is the content—content in this case being the words, photos, hyperlinks, videos, and sounds. Dave Clark (2008) argued that, though this separation allows for a “rapid reuse and repurposing of content,” it also tends to make design scholars uneasy:

Design scholars both within and outside of our field have long argued for a whole document approach, in which content and presentation must be designed simultaneously to be rhetorically effective. Design should be thought of not as a look and feel imposed on top of content but as a rhetorical melding of form and function. (p. 36)

Theoretically, the form/content separation is problematic in that form is implied as *not* content. Anne Frances Wysocki (2001) has repeatedly argued against a form/content split, noting that, although our handbooks and textbooks tend to “assume content is separate from form, writing from the visual, information from design, word from image” (p. 138), in practice it is not possible to make such a clear distinction between “design and information” (p. 160).

The last decade has seen a rise in visual rhetorical theory and practice amongst compositionists. Consider, for example, the rise of composition textbooks focusing on visual rhetoric (Faigley, George, Palchik, & Selfe, 2004; McQuade & McQuade, 2006; Ruszkiewicz, Anderson, & Friend, 2006) and Diana George’s (2002) frequently cited argument that “[f]or students who have grown up in a technology-saturated and an image-rich culture, questions of communication and composition absolutely will include the visual, not as attendant to the verbal but as complex communication intricately related to the world around them” (p. 32). I think it is safe to say compositionists value visual communication; moreover, we acknowledge as the New London Group did in 1996 that “literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (p. 61).

The move toward multimodal composition has worked to undo the word/image split and encouraged a pedagogy that engages with the rhetorical impact of not just words, but images, design, and sound. In spite of what seems to be pedagogical attention toward modes beyond the alphabetic, we need to acknowledge that in practice Net Generation students, as well as ourselves, are discouraged in Web 2.0 from creating designs. We are certainly posting information, but this information has become “content” placed in a “form” beyond the user’s control. I worry that unless we, along with our students, engage in analysis and discussions of online design, in the absence of creating designs—our alienation from “form” or “presentation”—we will further render the template invisible. If we are really to do the new work of composing, that which Kathleen Blake Yancey in her 2004 CCCC Chair’s Address argued “includes rhetoric and is about literacy [and] includes the literacy of print: it adds on to it and brings the notions of practice and activity

and circulation and media and screen and networking to our conceptions of process” (p. 320), then we must (re)engage ourselves and our students with the rhetoric of the interface and thus the rhetoric of design.

5. Interface matters

The interface of any software, web, or operating system is a designed space. Interface designers purposefully choose graphical elements, fonts, colors, shapes, and sounds. In the early-mid 1990s, computers and composition scholars brought the rhetoric of software and interface design to the attention of English Studies. Cynthia L. [Selfe](#) and [Richard J. Selfe](#) (1994) famously examined the Macintosh operating system, arguing for an understanding of the interface as a “linguistic contact zone” (p. 494). Selfe and Selfe encouraged readers to see the interface as a map that “is orientated simultaneously along the axes of class, race, and cultural privilege [and] aligned with the values of rationality, hierarchy, and logocentrism characteristic of Western patriarchal cultures” (p. 491). Such arguments helped many of us teaching with and about composing technologies to question and rethink the power of software and operating system interfaces.

[Anne Frances Wysocki](#) and [Julia I. Jasken](#) (2004) look back to such arguments alongside textbook and handbook design instruction in order to explore the importance of understanding “interfaces as rhetorical” (p. 33). In spite of the fact that scholars have argued for such a recognition, textbooks and handbooks tend to ignore the rhetorical function of design. Though textbooks and handbooks often describe “good” interface design as invisible, in that it shouldn’t impede the user from performing tasks, this does not mean, as Wysocki, Jasken, and others before them argued, that it is absent of ideology. Wysocki and Jasken point to [Paul LeBlanc](#) (1990) and [Paul Taylor](#) (1992) as scholars who recognized the rhetoric of design. In exploring how software functions within ideologies, LeBlanc (1990) argued that “software programs are not neutral” (p. 8), and he encouraged teachers to “take care that the [computer-assisted composition] tools both our students and we will use do not possess an ideological foundation we would prefer to keep out of our classrooms” (p. 11). Similarly, Taylor (1992) argued that computer programs “manage the user’s actions by establishing possible and recommended actions” (p. 45).

Wysocki and Jasken, in embracing the rhetoric of the interface, encouraged “instruction that helps students attain a broad and mindful view of interfaces” as opposed to instruction that views interfaces as arhetorical and emphasizes “the values of efficiency, easy of use, and transparency over other possible human activities and relations” (p. 38). In a Web 2.0 world where design remains primarily beyond a user’s control, the interface seemingly functions in an arhetorical way; an interface that allows an easy post is a success. Yet, as we know, interfaces do rhetorical work. If we are to critically engage with the rhetoric of the interface and critically engage with Web 2.0, we must pay attention to how Web 2.0 interfaces are shaping our interactions and ourselves.

The loss of design agency witnessed in Web 2.0 is troubling in two ways. First, by not producing our own online designs, we have little control over a large part of our representation. Even when we can choose a template², something sites like Blogger and Bebo encourage, we are not producing the design ourselves. Having a choice of design is clearly more empowering than having no choice, yet users remain limited to the predetermined options. Because of the form/content split and the ways in which CSS and (X)HTML function alongside the databases underlying most Web 2.0 sites, the overall design layout tends to remain the same; the colors and fonts tend to be the only elements that change.

Second, composing texts, more specifically making choices about the composition of a page or screen, helps individuals think through the ways in which design functions to make meaning and produce selves. As [Mary E. Hocks](#) (2003) writes, “[T]hrough designing digital documents and then testing to determine how people see and read them, our students develop an awareness of themselves as active producers of knowledge in their discipline or profession and as agents in the world around them” (p. 205). I worry that the loss of design production in Web 2.0 might lead to less critical consciousness not only about the meaning design conveys but also the ways in which that meaning is

² I want to be clear that Web 2.0 significantly blurs any distinction between interface and template. Consider, for example, the web site Blogger. A blog author engages with an interface in order to post content to his or her blog. This content is then presented in the design template chosen by the user. This “final” product, the blog content in the blog template, is still an interface in that audience members can engage with the design in order to post comments, hence changing the shape of the text. There never really is a “final” product posted in a static template; instead, the template is the interface. I use “interface” to describe the page in action—that is, when an author or audience member sees the text as something to alter or add to. In contrast, I use “template” to describe the design as a static product, realizing that this moment is brief and inextricably linked back to the interface.

enmeshed with the world around us. Gunther Kress and Theo VanLeeuwen (1996) argue, “images of whatever kind [are] entirely within the realm of ideology, as means—always—for the emergence of ideological positions” (p. 12). If Web 2.0 takes design away from us, then we need to find a way to reengage it.

6. The design of social networking

Before offering some suggestions to help us, along with our students, reengage with the rhetoric of design, I want to provide an example of how template-driven design shapes meaning. In order to illustrate the “interface as rhetorical” (Wysocki & Jasken, 2004, p. 33), I examine the design of my own MySpace and Facebook profiles. Although this is a limited example in that it comes from a particular genre within Web 2.0—that of social networking—I use it to bring to light the ways in which Web 2.0 templates shape understanding.

The act of posting a social networking profile allows, in danah boyd’s words, users to “write themselves and their community into being” (2007, p. 2). Though boyd speaks specifically about teenagers, no matter the user’s age, the act of composing a profile is an act of composing the self. In the spaces of social networking, people organize themselves according to a range of identifiers, including religious affiliations, clubs, alma maters, workplaces, and hometowns. These networks are created by befriending others and becoming part of specified groups. But, none of this would happen if a user didn’t first create a profile.

Profiles are constructed in social networking sites by simply filling out a series of online forms. The content posted in these forms—including uploaded photos and information about the user—is then displayed within a pre-defined template. Although Facebook and MySpace profiles serve similar purposes, that is, as a representation of the individual—what boyd calls “a form of individual home page” (p. 6)—the interface of each site encourages very different readings.

6.1. *The design of Facebook: The self as relational*

A Facebook profile (Fig. 1) includes the user’s uploaded picture in the upper-left hand corner and general information below (Networks, Relationships Status, and Birthday). Yet, the largest visual territory on the profile is given to the Wall—a report that shows all user activity on a given day. For example, as I write this paper and view my profile, it shows that at 2:12pm today I updated my status to “Kristin is in her office on a Saturday. Whine,” below which it lists the comments people have made on this status; for example, a former student says, “I hope someday I can whine about having to be in my office on Saturday (right now it’s a given).” Following the status update comments, it lists that at 10:43am I wrote on another user’s Wall. Scrolling down reveals previous days’ activities. The Wall lists not only actions I have taken but also lists actions others have taken in regards to me—for example, photos people have commented on, images I have been tagged in, or Wall posts from my friends.

Although the design of a Facebook profile is visually dominated by the Wall, given that users tend to read left-to-right and top-to-bottom, the profile picture will most likely be the first place the eyes go. The profile is read in part by image and in part by the actions the user has taken, as well as the actions others have taken in relation to the user. Although one can click on the tabs next to the Wall in order to see other areas of content (“Info” includes general information about the user, “Photos” includes photos the user has uploaded, and “Boxes” includes applications the user has added), the Facebook template encourages an understanding of ourselves and each other through the image we choose of ourselves along with the actions we take and the actions of others—those we befriend, those who comment on our photos, post on our walls, and comment on our status. This construction is even more prevalent in the Home view.

When a user logs into Facebook, he or she sees an interface similar to the profile. Instead of only seeing one’s own actions, however, he or she sees a News Feed that reports all friends’ actions. In the Home view (which only the user can see) the profile picture is significantly smaller and the News Feed takes up a huge portion of the page. The visual dominance of the News Feed suggests its importance, and because it is so much larger than any other section of the page, it encourages us to understand others through their actions in Facebook. It also encourages us to understand ourselves in relation to the actions of others. In the case of both the profile view and the home view, the design template encourages an understanding of self and others in part through our image and in large part through actions taken within the space of Facebook.

Facebook does not offer any means of changing its interface. For example, one cannot interchange the location of the Wall and the profile picture, nor can one get rid of the Wall view altogether and replace it with a YouTube video,

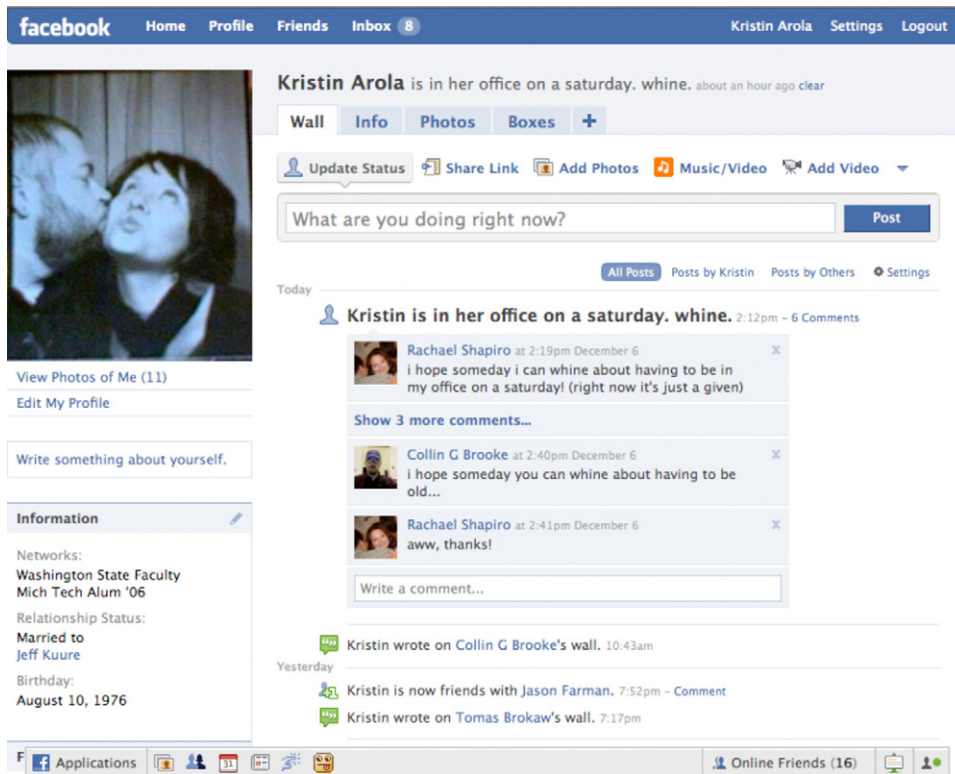


Fig. 1. Facebook Profile.

nor can one change the grey boxes of status comments into pink circles (should one want to make such changes). Users can adjust their Facebook settings in order to control what stories are published on the Wall and in the News Feed, but the design of the template remains the same. The elements remain in place, the background is always white, the main navigation bar is always blue, and the text is always a sans-serif font. Because it remains static and is the same for every user, the interface fades to the background and users are encouraged to enact and understand identities through interaction with others, not through a tightly controlled representation. You are what you post and what others post about you.

6.2. The design of MySpace: Self-determined representations

In contrast to Facebook, the default MySpace profile (Fig. 2) produces a design template that encourages a much different reading. Similar to Facebook, the picture is in the top left and serves as an initial visual identifier. Unlike Facebook, however, the template displays content posted solely by the user. The right-hand side of the page includes a Blurb section in which users can describe “About me” and “Who I’d like to meet.” Underneath the Blurbs are avatars of the user’s top friends (one can change who appears in this section). The left-hand side of the page includes information on how to contact the user, underneath which is a section listing the user’s interests. Facebook’s design template, because it gives visual importance to the Wall and the News Feed, encourages an understanding of the user through their actions and relations with others; in contrast, MySpace’s default template encourages an understanding of the user through self-determined content. Many users choose not to post alphabetic content, like I have done, but instead post images, videos, or sound files. In either case, users choose content and thus are read in a more intentional manner. MySpace includes a Comments section where friends can post comments to and about the user, yet this space is located beneath Top Friends—in order to see it, the user has to scroll down. Unlike Facebook’s Wall, which begins above the fold, MySpace’s Comments is located below the fold and thus does not create an immediate visual impact.

Like Facebook, MySpace includes both the profile page and a Home view. The Home interface, like all of MySpace, is heavily laden with advertising. The upper-left hand box of the Home interface includes the user’s photo and direct

myspace.com a place for friends. User Shortcuts: [dropdown] [Web] Search [GOOGLE]

Home Mail Profile Friends Music Video More My Account Sign Out

kristin

"love, music, wine, and revolution"

Female
32 years old
pullman, Washington
United States

Online Now!

Last Login:
12/6/2008

View My: [Pics](#) | [Videos](#)

Contacting kristin

Send Message	Forward to Friend
Add to Friends	Add to Favorites
IM / Call	Block User
Add to Group	Rank User

MySpace URL:
myspace.com/sisutits

kristin's Interests

General
saunas, lake superior, northern lights, suomi breakfasts, good live shows where i can sit down w/ a beer and bitch about how old i am, good beer, tofu skin rolls, good margaritas, peanuts in the shell, dinner parties, fixing other people's problems, the rhetoric of online environments, my husband's cooking, pretending i know how to garden, crocheting string bikinis, two tracking, teaching, soy lattes, walking through my neighborhood and waving at old people, karaoke at the greenlight bar, snowboarding

kristin is in your extended network

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kristin's Blurbs

About me:
remaining in love with the mundane. liking my bike. wondering if i've really left them their world.

Who I'd like to meet:
a talking panda. the many bears that lurk in my dreams. people who know that they don't know. george stephanopoulos.

kristin's Friend Space (Top 8)

kristin has 73 friends.

Jokes 	Katie 	Jeff 	Meg
Doctor Adam 	anne 	james 	Dan

Fig. 2. MySpace Profile.

links to forms for updating profile content. Below are different options for adding applications, updating mood, and checking mail. The right-hand side of the page is dominated by advertising, but also includes a section called Friend Updates. This section functions similarly to the Facebook News Feed and was added to MySpace after the rise in Facebook's popularity. Similar to the MySpace profile comments, Friend Updates lie below the fold; therefore, to view it one has to scroll down. The Home view places visual emphasis on advertisements and links to update the profile; therefore, though a user might understand her identity and relationships through the actions of others (the Friend Updates section), the interface strongly encourages not only a consumer identity but also one where posting new profile content is valued.

6.3. Social networking sites: The powers and limitations of choice

The default designs of Facebook and MySpace employ different design strategies resulting in different understandings of self, yet MySpace, in what might seem a dramatic possibility for design agency, allows users to modify the profile template. Originally this was not an intentional act by MySpace. Early on, users found a loophole that allowed them to modify the code (boyd, 2007). This loophole prompted an influx of template-generating sites that function to assist those unable to tweak the code themselves. A Google search for "MySpace templates" returns hundreds of sites, all offering assistance with template tweaking. These sites display a range of design templates and provide instructions on how to embed code in order to employ the template of your choice. For example, I went to the site Pyzam, chose a template I found appealing, pasted the code into my "Edit Profile" section (as per the instructions on Pyzam), and voila—I changed the default template (Fig. 2) to a new design (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Modified MySpace Profile.

At first glance, the ability to modify the template might seem a powerful tool for controlling modes of self-representation. Yet, the differences between Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 are not as stark as they might seem at first glance. The fonts, background, and colors have all changed, but the page components retain the same arrangement and shape. For example, the default design (Fig. 2) includes a white background whereas the modified version (Fig. 3) includes a swirled hot pink and brown background—yet the rectangles around each element and the location of the elements remain the same. Undoubtedly, the new design impacts how my profile is read, yet because there is no change in the visual importance given to the various components of the page, it is likely that much understanding will remain the same. I might now be read as whimsical and energetic, but I am still read as someone identified by my picture, my posted information, and my top friends. I did choose this particular design over others, but it is not a design of my own making—I chose within a limited set of options.

Template choices have recently made their way from template-tweaking sites to MySpace itself. In response to the frequency of template tweaking, as well as the fact that Bebo—another social-networking site—includes hundreds of design templates, in late 2008 MySpace added a function that allows users to choose a design template from within its walls. As I write this piece, there are only a handful of template choices, one-fifth of which advertise an upcoming movie or video game release (again, reinforcing a consumer identity). Still, this move towards including design templates within the confines of MySpace enables users to choose a profile through the click of a button—they no longer even have to read directions on embedding code.

When users participate with MySpace or Facebook, they agree to participate in a space that shapes one's identity and one's sense of others in particular ways. The design template is in no way the only means of shaping identity in social networking, as the posted words, images, links, videos, and actions one takes play a huge role in how one is read.

Undoubtedly, there is a rhetoric of the post. Yet, as illustrated above, the template encourages particular understandings of the self and of others. Using a MySpace template generator will modify how one is read (for example, as more playful, serious, masculine, artistic, edgy, etc.), but in large part the MySpace user is still constructed as an autonomous individual who shapes and controls one's own representation through pre-determined content (the Interests and Blurbs) and whose relation to others, though important, lies below the fold. In contrast, a user within Facebook is shaped as a node within a network of meaning, a network that continually shifts in accordance with one's actions and the actions of others. The design of the space shapes understanding.

7. Bringing design back

If the template is a designed rhetorical space, if Web 2.0 encourages the split between content (the post) and form (the template), and if the form is controlled not by the user but by the company behind the site (or the designer behind the template), then how do we empower our Net Generation students when it comes to design? It is highly unlikely that Web 2.0 is going to change its form/content split, yet it behooves us to cast a suspicious eye on the libratory narrative of Web 2.0 espoused by popular media (consider the aforementioned *Time* and *Newsweek* articles). Additionally, consider programmer and essayist Paul Graham's claim that one of the most powerful effects of Web 2.0 "is democracy. . . . On the web, people can publish whatever they want" (2005, Graham). Similarly, technology consultant Harold Jarache (2007) suggested, "Social media on the web (blogs, wikis, podcasts, videos) have given the 1 billion connected people on the planet the basic tools of production in a knowledge economy". Yet, filling out forms and uploading content, while rhetorical in its own way, leaves design behind. As Amazon.com CEO Jeff Bezos has argued, "Web 2.0. . . is about making the Internet useful for computers" (as cited in MacManus & Porter, 2005). In this view, Web 2.0 is not about democracy or shared knowledge: it's about making technology more efficient.

As we plod through the template-driven path of Web 2.0, consider Yancey's caution:

If we continue to partition [technology] off as just something technical, or outside the parameters governing composing, or limit it to the screen of the course management system, or think of it in terms of the bells and whistles and templates of the PowerPoint screen, students in our classes learn only to *fill up* those templates and *fill in* those electric boxes—which, in their ability to invite intellectual work, are the moral equivalent of the dots on a multiple choice test. Students will not compose and create, making use of all the means of persuasion and all the possible resources thereto; rather, they will complete someone else's software package: they will be the invention of that package. (2004, p. 320)

If we don't want our students to become the invention of the template, what do we do? Realistically, we are not going to change the ubiquity of template-driven design, but we can change the shape of our students' discursive consciousness and rhetorical awareness. One avenue is to analyze the interfaces of Web 2.0. Teachers can ask students how Facebook would be different if there were no user profile pictures, or if the rectangular listing of the News Feed was replaced by pink thought bubbles, or if one's status appeared vertically instead of horizontally and could only be displayed through the use of animated emotive stick figures. Such interrogations help students see how the design of every element impacts the overall effect. In particular, making seemingly ludicrous suggestions (for example, what if every element on Facebook appeared in concentric circles) helps interrogate the ways in which seemingly neutral or invisible interfaces shape our understanding and use of the space. It can be particularly rewarding to perform this assignment with interfaces already in use. For example, if students are using a university-sponsored course-management software tool, ask them to analyze how the interface encourages them to post, engage, learn, and behave as a student in a particular class and at a particular university.

In addition to such analysis, experimenting with design can be productive. Teachers can ask students to redesign an interface—either in an image-editing software program or with crayons and paper—for a different purpose or a different audience. For example, ask students to "design a MySpace interface for your Grandmother," or "design a MySpace interface that encourages you to meet people with whom you share similar musical tastes." Such prompts get students producing their own designs and help them enact visual rhetorical choices. Along with such assignments, I include a written or oral justification in which they articulate the rationale behind their choices. To describe this rationale, however, they need a shared language.

A number of textbooks and handbooks provide visual terminology, but I have found that creating the terminology within the classroom invests students in the process and also allows for a discussion of the rhetoric of terminology.

To create a shared terminology, I ask students to analyze a shared text and list every design strategy they notice³. We then share these strategies and work to come to a consensus on the language that will best describe the rhetorical choice. This list of terms and their definitions can become a class text that can be updated as the semester progresses. Performing analysis, producing redesigns, and generating and using terminology helps students engage with the power of the template.

In an era when Web 2.0 technologies dominate our web experiences, and when the media by and large sings the praises of the personal empowerment afforded by Web 2.0 technologies, it is important for those of us teaching composition to bring a critical lens to the design of Web 2.0. Although there are many empowering and engaging features of user-driven content, we need to interrogate the form/content split embraced by Web 2.0. In a 2004 keynote address at the Online News Associate Conference, Associated Press CEO Tom Curley (2004) claimed that Web 2.0 had “begun to unlock content from any vessel we try to put it in.” The belief that design is simply a “vessel” or a “container,” and that content is the *real* meat of the Web, threatens to make the effects of design invisible. Those of us committed to engaging with modes of meaning beyond the alphabetic need to work to bring design to a discursive level so that we, along with our students, become attuned to the ways in which design encourages users to participate in online spaces. If we are to enact a meaningful multimodal pedagogy, then we need to make design visible.

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³ This particular assignment comes courtesy of Paul Muhlhauser.

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