CYBERFEMINISM INTERSECTS WRITING RESEARCH

STUDIES IN DIGITAL RHETORIC

Mary Hocks

Cyberfeminism has been a rapidly growing area of feminist practice and performance in the media arts and other fields since the term was coined in the 1990s. As an area of rhetorical study, cyberfeminism offers researchers and students opportunities to develop activist rhetorics about techno-science, gender and other identities, and cultural practices. Australian feminist Sadie Plant coined cyberfeminism in the early 1990s as an "alliance" or "connection" between women and technology defined largely by online art projects and girl sites on the Web that remake these technologies in a new feminist image, while American linguistic anthropologist Kira Hall wrote the first article carefully delineating the terms cyber- and feminism (Hall 1996; Plant 1996). Plant's concept of networking fits nicely with feminist strategies that appropriate emerging communications and information technologies, and then redesign technologies in the interests of women. Creating space, taking up the tools, and increasing visibility are powerful activist rhetorical stances. But this work does not necessarily require or lead to a theory of rhetoric. Early work made women visible...
must work harder to connect to the material lives and lived bodily experiences of women, and in ways that draw on the best approaches offered by feminism. As activist practice, however, that works for social and cultural change, cyberfeminism must shift and change according to the emerging practices of digital rhetoric.

Digital rhetoric includes the practices of and contexts for communication (in its multisensory definition) in digital spaces. Teachers and researchers who work in digital rhetoric analyze digital documents as an expanded kind of writing and rhetorical text, from multimedia content to composition processes to interface and information design. The two-volume special issue of Computers and Composition (2002) entitled “Digital Rhetoric” contains many good articles along these lines, but still others exist in edited collections and journals read in fields such as communication studies. Scholars study sites for digital literacy, locations such as classrooms, writing centers, community literacy programs, and workplaces, as well as virtual spaces on the Web, and in other media.

As important bridges between philosophical feminist practices and lived experiences of women, cyberfeminist projects cannot afford to ignore the forms that rhetorical practices and rhetorical appeals take on in digital spaces. In rhetoric and composition studies as well as technical and professional writing, women’s rhetorics and feminist rhetorics have grown as areas of inquiry, but have not included many of the current online rhetorical practices—an observation echoed by Gail Hawisher (2003) in her preface to the Feminism and Composition sourcebook published by the National Council of Teachers of English. I often wonder why feminist multimedia projects keep disappearing, and why they are so hard to find in the first place. Apparently, like student work, cyberfeminist work gets done, or partly done, shown and raved about, but then it disappears. Even when we do find it, we must continually ask, as Gajjala does in her introduction for this volume: What is invisible in this cyberfeminism? What is transparent in these new media productions? Cyberfeminism shares with digital rhetoric an interest in the possibilities of a malleable and distributed medium. To be done well, cyberfeminist practice must advocate for gendered and other embodied identities in a politically committed way that creates progressive change. This chapter has many implications for how to correct these perceived gaps, but it is also about how I teach cyberfeminism using digital rhetoric in my English Department writing studies classes. First, an anecdote: I tried to offer my course in 2003, with the (I thought) clear title, “Feminist Rhetorics of Technology.” The English students avoided it because of the “technology” part and the women’s studies students avoided it because of the “rhetoric” part. I find this situation

Cyberfeminisms could imagine ways of linking the historical and philosophical practices of feminism to contemporary feminist projects and networks both on and off the Net, and to the material lives and experiences of women in the integrated circuit, taking full account of age, race, class, and economic differences. If feminism is to be adequate to its cyberpotential then it must mutate to keep up with the shifting complexities of social realities and life conditions as they are changed by the profound impact communications technologies and technoscience have on all our lives.

The best answer to Wilding’s concerns came in a 2002 issue of Rhizomes on “Cyberfeminisms,” edited by Gajjala and including several scholars from this volume. When done well, feminism works in the interests of all underrepresented and oppressed groups, including gender as simply a part of constructed social identities, as it interrogates and works against dominant cultural ideologies. I agree with Wilding that cyberfeminist practice

and was celebratory: lots of arts projects, political and community organizing (e.g., NOW online; UN materials on Women and Development; Joan Kornamen’s Women Studies listserv and digital text archives). Such work was important for feminists networking, pushing policy, and recovering histories but it was rather untheorized like some other second-wave liberal and radical feminist work. I would describe this early work as usually information-based or activist, certainly purposeful, but often without a deep sense of audience or rhetorical situation. The best early theoretical work builds on Donna J. Haraway’s theory of the cyborg (Balsamo, 1996, or a truly nuanced sense of partial postmodern identity, Terry & Calvert, 1997). Cyberfeminist postmodernism is not just the narrow view offered by what Michelle Kendrick (2002) called “the hypertext boys.”

Cyberfeminism can also simply reproduce the White, middle-class feminism that has dominated academia since the second wave. It’s definitely class-based in terms of unequal access and digital divide issues. Some promising projects recenter feminism on specific political commitments, on forms and histories of oppression of particular groups, on situated communities. But cyberfeminism is only as good as the feminist scholar using these digital spaces; it is becoming more nuanced, more diverse, and more specifically located as researchers and activists get more involved with designing digital technology applications. In her essay reflecting back on the First Cyberfeminist International Conference in 1997, Faith Wilding (2001) complained that cyberfeminism too often ignores feminism’s important theoretical roots and definitions. She argued:

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DIGITAL RHETORICAL PRACTICES

For more than 25 years and still counting, teachers and researchers in computers and composition and technical communication have studied how digital media have changed communication, collaboration, work, design—all part of writing and the making of texts, but well beyond texts, too. As emerging technologies make their way into our culture and our classrooms, we usually find ourselves responsible for figuring out how these technologies impact and change texts, teaching, sometimes the whole campus, and also how students might produce things with them. How might students learn and grow and develop many literacies by analyzing and producing digital media texts? The New London Group’s concept of “multiliteracy,” especially, has had a wide impact on how scholars in writing studies talk about production in technological spaces using the most recent multimedia technologies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Interestingly, the New London Group’s recent orientation from linguistics lead them to ask how material literacies and languages can empower students in the pre-university curriculum, but without always doing research on these audiences. Gunther Kress (1998) in particular has been picked up and used widely to talk about “Multimodal literacy” and his influence was the subject in a special issue of Computers and Composition (2005). Other educators conduct more empirical research on children’s media literacy. David Buckingham (2003), for example, critiques Kress and the linguistics theorists in the New London Group for being too text-centered, abstract and unoriginal when researching and studying their audiences. Buckingham and his collaborators teach and write about media literacy for children using observations and interviews of young people as they produce and perform using digital media authoring tools. Similarly, the corrective “polymorphic literacy” offered by Kristie Fleckinstein (2004) in College English includes nonverbal elements as she used the examples of children to show wider, more creative literacy practices. Fleckinstein still focused on the semiotic practices of reading and producing texts, but expands our notions of “multiliteracy.”

Any alternative rhetoric from dominant cultural arrangements seeks to construct resistant or subversive discourses and to get them heard. When historically underrepresented or socially and economically deprived groups appropriate tools of power, they sometimes can change things or they can demonstrate resistance to the gendered and classed power dynamics of the dominant culture. Community media programs put the technologies of communication into the hands of kids and let them go, to see what young people will say and do. Media literacy programs within progressive education educate and empower kids by teaching them to analyze and produce media in their own interests. One of my oldest friends, a middle school art teacher, learns new technology practices all the time from her young students. Using tools, art and design practices, and lots of humor, Karen inspires these kids to make self-portraits in Photoshop, collaborative movies in i-Movie, and humorous documentaries that dramatize equipment failures. College classes, hopefully, teach young adults to see and weigh many points of view, construct knowledge of their own, take leadership, and act in the world in others’ interests as well as their own (idealistic, I know). So, at the collegiate level, we hope to develop classes that engender the kinds of creativity and spontaneity that give students something to say, but also tools to critique and subvert dominant cultural discourses.

I want to suggest first, by way of examples from my Feminism and Technology course, just how digital rhetoric practices can foster some of these educational goals. I then offer my visually and rhetorically based assignments—what Buckingham (2003) called “simulations,” based in interesting fictional situations that still have real impact on real audiences. My next section analyzes a student example using basic design tools to demonstrate resistance to the typical gender/power dynamics of gaming culture. The traditional appeals and canons of rhetoric can all be embedded and extended within the digital design process. But, more importantly, students studying cyberfeminism can construct alternative spaces and resistant discourses; thus, the purposes, situations, and possible impacts of media productions become clear for students when they create in a motivated context. I pull together the specific intersections and some remaining questions for cyberfeminism and digital rhetoric in my final section.

THE FEMINISM AND TECHNOLOGY COURSE

The vocabulary, social aims and research methods of cyberfeminism come from a variety of disciplines: Art and Design, Communication Studies,
Computers and Composition Studies, Cultural Studies, Political Science, Philosophy and Sociology of Science, Science/Technology Studies. My approach to Feminism and Technology uses interdisciplinary methods, rhetorical criticism, and composition practices to explore how gender is inscribed in technologies and how technologies literally write and visually represent our notions of gender. I have applied this approach to my own digital media projects and also incorporated it into my Feminism and Technology seminar for advanced undergraduates and master’s-level students. The course readings, film screenings, and projects help illuminate how the media of everyday life, including digital new media, serve as educational channels and impact cultural formations about various identities. Hands-on experiences with technologies help foster a critical consciousness about technologies and their use in our culture. These issues of inscription and representation have a profound impact on us all in our everyday lives as writers, researchers, and activists.

Feminist epistemologies of science and technology offer the philosophical foundation to my students. After reading classic works by Donna Haraway, Evelyn Fox-Keller, Sandra Harding, and Judy Wajcman on feminist critiques of science and technology, my students move onto influential cultural studies of technology. Anne Balsamo’s (1996) *Technologies of the Gendered Body* is still the most commonly assigned text for courses in Feminism, gender, science, and technology. Students also read from the collections *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life* (Terry & Calvert, 1999), several collections of essays with cybersexualities in the title, and *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace* (Cherny & Weise, 1996). Online sources we use include professional and governmental women’s organizations, educational and activist projects, articles and zines, bibliographies, and other research collections. Students look at a variety of media: They discuss gender representations in films like *China Syndrome, Blade Runner, The Matrix,* and *Alien,* in Web sites and digital multimedia, and in online games. Ultimately, I want students to apply these theories and studies in critical ways appropriate for undergraduates and graduate students. I ask students to critique and then re-imagine and even re-invent how technologies represent gender and other identities. I want them to critique and design work rhetorically in a way that’s ultimately transformative. My course thus centers on activist rhetoric—visual and verbal rhetoric that transforms the audience by transforming the technology. Cyberfeminist activism can benefit greatly from understanding the rhetorical critique and design strategies that attend to the visual and cultural rhetorics operating in emerging technologies. Public discourse about new information and communication technologies fosters intelligent public conversations about feminist cultural politics and, ultimately, can create political and social change through digital activism. Effective digital rhetorical practice has become crucial for successful cyberfeminist activism.

**VISUAL RHETORICAL STRATEGIES**

In Hocks (2003), I identified several strategies—*ethos,* hybrid identities and transparency of the interface—that help us track a continuum of persuasive visual rhetorical strategies in professional academic work online. The rhetorical appeal to *ethos* lets us analyze how writers/designers use ethical appeals to build credibility with the audience while also drawing on literate forms in the digital interface that they recognize. This notion of transparency is, of course, both useful for talking about interfaces and whom it inevitably excludes.

I use my own new media project as an instructive example: The Women of the World Talk Back Multimedia Documentary co-designed with Anne Balsamo. The “talking-head” strategy of using an expert or recognized official who offers sound bytes on political and social topics helped us build an interview-based documentary for an international audience. We feature professional quality interviews taken with recognized leaders and feminist organizers speaking in a global context (Fig. 10.1).

The talking-head documentary format signifies “expert interviews” from television and film, whereas the video control buttons duplicate controls from other video media technologies like VCRs and DVDs. The official and logical language of the conference—“women’s rights are human rights”—was woven throughout the interviews to reinforce the logical appeal and the rhetorical situation for this new media presentation at a UN conference. Matters of delivery, such as voice, expression and gesture, as well as professional video presentation made UN conference attendees want to “listen” and “talk back” to these official spokespeople. Those attendees who chose to be interviewed were included later with their headshots and country/organization titles like the UN conference setting itself, so that participants’ views are presented in a style that invokes those official UN delegates (Fig. 10.2).

These rhetorical strategies of *ethos* within forms of delivery depend on their integration into a visual interface that an international feminist audience will recognize and find persuasive. The dialogic structure of digital media essentially means that the appeals to *logos* are not limited to linear
or binary logic, but that multiple perspectives can be represented simultaneously: the logic of and—rather than either—or. Borrowing from Bruno Latour (1992), we can identify digital media's non-modern quality of hybridity—that is, the hybrid forms and dialogic potential of this kind of communication. We thus define digital media as hybrids of words, images, and information, knowable only in specific local practices and within a network of contingent change. Digital media had been discussed for some time in hypertext theory as characteristically postmodern, but Latour and Donna Haraway both identify hybrid forms and identities as historically specific reactions to the fragmentation generated by global capitalism and the resulting epistemological and ontological displacement. Whereas Latour suggested the hybridity of binary communication media, Haraway (1991) described the hybrid identities and bodies that emerge when postindustrial capitalism impacts the lived experiences of real people. These talk back statements offer a few of the lived hybrid experiences that exist and resist within the dominant UN culture.

Finally, visual representation through metaphor design elements creates another layer of visual rhetoric by offering symbolic objects familiar to the audience (Fig. 10.3). A digitized blanket creates the background for the main menu screen and invokes for us women's material culture. The symbolism of woman juxtaposed with the globe becomes an abstract and uni-

Figure 10.1. Nongovernmental Organizational Forum Screen.

Figure 10.2. Talk Back Interviews Screen.

Figure 10.3. Women of the world talk back main screen.
versal, language-free icon suggested by the conference and echoed in our project title. This rhetorical style depends completely on audience and situation for its effectiveness. Despite its deliberately hybrid form of dialogue and its recognizable features within this UN context, our interface limitations become apparent when we note the project is only in English, that it relies on both color and spoken word, and that it offers only a few self-selected interviews by women participants who could afford to attend the conference. We never claim that this project transparently represents “women” or their “issues” globally or locally, but instead we make that problem an issue in itself. By deconstructing my own digital media project for students more familiar with written texts, they begin to see how the elements of rhetoric operate in the more unfamiliar digital media texts.

In my gender and technology course, my students first learned how images are easily manipulated for the purposes of critique and social commentary, like the example created by San Francisco cartoonist Kieron Dwyer in 2000 (Fig. 10.4).

This mock logo landed Dwyer in a lawsuit with Starbucks without warning, as described in an article by the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (2000). This example plays with analogies that depend on appeals to logos, logical relationship between hyperbolic elements, to make the argument via parody—this parody is, of course, dependent on shared cultural knowledge to create the humor. My students also studied the use of shared cultural knowledge in the example of O.J. Simpson’s image altered for the cover of Time magazine, represented here from an article on the ethics of journalism (Long, 1999). This image underscores the power of digital manipulation to capitalize on systemic racism and dominant cultural fears about race. The use of photographic distortion to affect ethos depends entirely on the audience’s unconscious or conscious fears about race. When students began critiques on

Figure 10.4. Dwyer’s Starbucks logo parody and O.J. on the cover of Time.

their own, several students began by critiquing gender inequities in online games and at the dangers of pro-anorexia Web sites masquerading as support groups. Students use these kinds of examples and critical skills to rethink rhetorically based approaches to technology before deciding how to redesign a technology for feminist activist purposes.

**DESIGN AS TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS: A STUDENT PROJECT**

Once students learn methods for rhetorical critique, they turn to redesign using the editing and authoring tools available in digital-editing software. In this assignment, students use examples and critical skills to rethink activist approaches to and uses of technology before deciding how to redesign a technology of their choice. Students are asked to design and present a creative project that enacts the political or social possibilities of some type of new media or technology. The purpose in designing technology projects is to imagine the political and activist manifestations of new technologies:

**Assignment: Critique and Redesign of a Technology**

This project asks you to identify and critique an everyday technology, to study the assumptions made by the technology, to document its use by actual users, and to propose ways to redesign the technology so that it better suits the needs of those users. That technology can be a common household technology or a specific software program. Pick something that you use yourself and feel comfortable analyzing and find other people who use the same technology.

In each case, you must first observe the technology yourself and think about how that technology represents or perpetuates ideas about “real life,” especially about identities and other cultural meanings (i.e., about race or gender, attitudes toward marriage or money or leisure time). You should also ask others about how they interpret and use the technology. Based on this primary research, you will offer a proposal for changes to the technology design and use. You will write an analysis and also provide illustrations of the technology to identify its purpose and audience, to point out the assumptions made, and what’s missing in the design of the technology. How might your redesign be activist in that it serves the needs of a particular audience? You will present your ideas and your design to the class at the end of the semester.
In response to this prompt, student projects ranged from Web sites aimed at women to revisions of screens in existing game software to drawings of remote controlled vacuum cleaners and even a nondigital multimedia performance of feminist activist artwork and music using overheads and a tape deck. My students discovered how easily and how completely assumptions and cultural values become embedded in technologies, which can work to oppress or leave out women, or anyone who doesn’t fit the assumptions about identity embedded into the design. Because they focus on visual rhetorical critique and the process of re-imagining a design, I believe that my students’ studies illustrate the complex web of historical and social and visual discourses that construct the relationships among gender, technology, and culture.

In the rest of this section, I focus on a collaborative student project that critiques the existing representations of gender, sexual orientation, and other assumptions embedded in technologies and then offers more inclusive designs that draw specifically on ethical appeals and hybrid identities to create a new sense of audience for these technologies. In good cultural critique fashion, the students construct alternative discourses about gender and technology that resist assumptions in the larger culture.

Two women’s studies students in my course took on the task of re-visualizing a popular real-life simulation game called The Sims (First Edition) by looking at its inscribed attitudes toward materialism, body image, sexuality, and life experiences. They explain in their presentation:

Since The Sims is marketed as a simulation of real activities that occur within the virtual space of the game, we are interested in whether or not this video game lives up to its potential in addressing issues of gender, sexual orientation, capitalism, and life experiences that cover a diverse sampling from the actual world. Just as the Internet and the genre of science fiction are considered to be alternative spaces where feminist concerns can be expressed, video games have the ability to offer the same exciting opportunities and alternative discourses.

Sims characters are crafted and designed by the players and given a certain amount of money to buy, build, or furnish a home. They have some free will, but must be directed by the players to live their lives successfully: “Like human beings, there are certain things that the Sims must have if they are to remain happy and alive.” So part of the player’s fun is to create and direct situations that make the Sims happy and productive by balancing employment, familial, and personal needs. In some ways, these goals appeal to the documented interests of girls and women who play video games to negotiate life experiences. My students played the game for a few weeks, testing its assumptions and its boundaries, concluding that Sims was a “yuppie neighborhood” that reflects a small percentage of society. They used Microsoft Paint and Image Composer to alter screen shots from the game in basic ways and reinforce their goals to add more options and make the game more inclusive.

Because romantic relationships are an important part of the game, my students tackled the question of sexual orientation first, asking, “are some of the characters gay, lesbian, or bisexual” so that they “represent the diverse motives and desires of actual human beings?” They explain: “While the designers claim that it is possible to create same-sex relationships within the game, the words ‘gay’ ‘same-sex’ and ‘homosexual’ are not included in the manual that explains how to play and how to build romantic relationships.” They then discovered by playing the game over time that same-sex affection was possible, but very difficult to make happen in their conditioning of the Sims’ behavior. They were able to get two male characters to “transgress the social stereotype that defines embracing as a nonmasculine behavior,” but it could go no further than the affectionate hug (Fig. 10.5). Likewise, by playing for weeks my students were finally able to get two female characters to sleep in the same bed, and for one female to be given the option of mourning her female partner when the other female died suddenly in a fire (Fig. 10.6). Needless to say, my students recommended making sexual orientation a basic option for creating Sims characters and making such interactions easier to navigate! (see Fig. 10.7).

My students also addressed the representations of materialism and body image in the game. Material possessions contribute largely to the

![Two Sims men hug.](image)
When designing the body of a new character, only three skin tones and hairstyles are options, and specific clothes are matched to particular body types that are stereotypic. Thus, they write:

The Sims is also guilty of adhering to unrealistic images of beauty and thinness (as you are not allowed to independently chose the type of clothing you want your Sim to wear or what weight/shape they will have. Only the thin Sim women are able to wear the sexy red dresses, and only the muscular men are able to go topless or wear tight gym shorts.

My students redesigned screens and added features that give more options for how Sims look, from a palate of skin colors for multiple races/ethnicities (and not just three), to more diverse body types and clothing (Fig. 10.9).

In the newer versions of the game, Sims characters have branched out in many subcultures offering more diverse representations of identity as a response to real players, including my two students. I’m convinced that my students asked the kinds of timely critical questions that are based solidly in feminist theoretical precedents. By engaging in rhetorical critique that focused on identity construction, they discovered how easily and how com-
pletely assumptions and cultural values become embedded in gaming technologies, which then can work to oppress or leave out anyone who doesn’t fit the assumptions about identity visualized in the design. By then using simple tools to redesign screens and “alter” the technology, they reimagine and revisualize how emerging technologies create identities and can advocate for an inclusive audience. This project, although technologically simple, offers the kind of self-conscious material critique and design that Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sirc (2004) define specifically as new media texts, “made by composers who are aware of the range of materials of texts and who then highlight the materiality... Such composers design texts that make as overtly visible as possible the values they embody” (p. 15).

**CHALLENGES FOR CYBERFEMINISM AND DIGITAL RHETORIC**

Cyberfeminism and digital rhetoric share design and composition process issues, particularly if we look at their underlying cultural and design theories, the choices made, limits established, and design metaphors. Despite rampant Web self-publishing, many projects result in dead-ends or disappearances because of the institutional pressures, the lack of resources for maintenance and academic labor, and the sheer time to get it done. We need to ask harder questions inspired by the sociology of science about our digital and cyberfeminist projects alike:

- Who has power? How can we get it?
- What/who is invisible? What isn’t transparent?
- Where do readers and authors find the pleasures of writing/reading/performing?
- What institutional infrastructures work for and against these pleasures, pushing against bodies that must live in time and space? (see Star, 2002; Star & Ruhleder, 1996).

When teaching and reflecting on digital media projects, I often wonder whether we go deep enough and provide enough contexts to situate studies of digital literacies, of digital spaces, of digital texts. Many scholars have tried, Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) *Remediation* being an obvious and influential example, but they often end up with binaries like word/image. They tend also to offer a disembodied theory of hypertext (Kendrick, 2002). Digital rhetoric needs ethnographic field research, interface design, user-centered design, and audience analysis methodologies, not just rhetorical criticism, to be more effective at establishing knowledge and learning. We need to study the materiality of all digital media (and not just its remediation), which also brings process back into the discussion of materiality: how you make a digital project, who makes it, and how that gets done (Hocks & Balsamo, 2003; Wysocki et al., 2004). Cyberfeminism reminds us just how much digital rhetoric needs grounded cultural critique; theory-building happens by doing, for example, through students’ visual redesign processes. Historical, sociocultural, and political analyses can situate digital rhetorical studies as local knowledge that is partial, but committed to helping find the truth in that specificity within a network of meaning. Teachers and researchers of digital rhetoric and cyberfeminism can all use the understandings and field research methods from media literacy and cultural studies that look at actual people, especially youth, using the media. This kind of teaching and learning pulls students into the messy incomplete process and the productive tensions they experience when emerging technologies and newer media make them think and critique and compose with new rhetorical power. I cannot imagine a more satisfying feminist classroom experience.

**NOTES**

1. I examined more than 30 syllabi online from at least five distinct disciplines to draw these conclusions about courses.
2. Student coursework used with permission. Quotations and images come from their written documents and screen captures from their project. I am grateful to them both for allowing me to analyze and acknowledge their work in this chapter.

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WEBBING CYBERFEMINIST PRACTICE

COMMUNITIES, PEDAGOGIES, AND SOCIAL ACTION

edited by

Kristine Blair
Radhika Gajjala
Bowling Green State University

Christine Tulley
University of Findlay

HAMPTON PRESS, INC.
CRESSKILL, NEW JERSEY
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