



The Rhetorical Template

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Abstract

This paper seeks to expand the conversation about templates in the context of Web 2.0. While templates in Web 2.0 constrain writing options, this does not mean that they divorce form and content. By grounding templates in scholarship on the rhetorical situation and using genre theory as a lens, I argue that writers can still use the prefabricated designs of Web 2.0 templates in creative and unexpected ways. Drawing on examples from my personal web activity and an assignment in my composition class, I call for developing innovative writing practices for templates in Web 2.0.

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This essay investigates the rhetorical role of a template for writers in Web 2.0. I argue templates, though constraining, do not necessarily cause a form and content split. This argument arises out of the following question: In Web 2.0, is filling in a template *the* rhetorical situation, or is filling in a template *part of* the rhetorical situation? This question picks up and expands the conversation about templates in Web 2.0. For instance, in “The Design of Web 2.0: The Rise of the Template, The Fall of Design,” Kirsten Arola (2010) noted that templates replaced the need for students and everyday web-writers to have web-authoring experience. Rather than using specialized computer coding languages, most web-writers now “post” simply by using the template of a prefabricated website. The post is a demonstration of the split between form and content that results from the rise of templates. Web-writers often do not have to account for font or presentation (form) and can instead focus on the words themselves (content). According to Arola:

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. (2010, p. 6)

To avoid the split between form and content, we should make templates visible by accounting for them as a crucial aspect of the composing process in Web 2.0. This means developing strategies for using templates in unanticipated, unexpected, and creative ways. These strategies place templates in the production process of Web 2.0 rhetoric. We, therefore, should consider what role templates play in rhetorical discourse and the situations that give rise to that discourse. To do so, I situate templates in the scholarship of rhetorical situations, drawing upon genre theory in order to take a flexible view of templates. I highlight, through personal examples, ways that writers could use a template.

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Although I acknowledge the limitations of a template, I show that these limitations are not new to the templates of Web 2.0 or even to the medium of the internet and do not eliminate the possibility for using a template creatively. Overall, I argue for a dynamic pedagogy that seeks out ways to control design when using a template.

1. Scholarship on the rhetorical situation

Templates in Web 2.0 are prefabricated designs that allow writers to create a coherent text. They differ from text-editors—e.g., word processing programs—in that they are forms with *predetermined* design and layout. These templates can be viewed in two ways. First, they can act as the rhetorical situation in which writers participate; various elements in the rhetorical situation combine to form a template. In the second case, a template is one of many elements in a rhetorical situation. In the former case, a template is *the* rhetorical situation, whereas in the latter it is *part of* the rhetorical situation. For instance, if I post an update on my Facebook page, does the template create a rhetorical situation for me as a writer? Or am I writing for the rhetorical situation of my personal context? The answer is most likely both. In either case, a template plays a significant role in the production of rhetorical discourse in Web 2.0. The current scholarship of rhetorical situations helps to understand the role of templates in this production. In the following discussion, all references to templates refer to templates in Web 2.0.

It is my estimation that templates act mostly as an additional element in the rhetorical situation. Much of the scholarship on the rhetorical situation views elements as circumscribed in the *confluence* of the rhetorical situation. Templates are also within the confluence of the rhetorical situation. The rhetorical situation generates rhetorical discourse, which “comes into existence as a response to situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 5). Thus, the ability of the writer to produce rhetorical discourse is circumscribed by the rhetorical situation, which implies that the writer is one of many elements. Lloyd Bitzer, in “The Rhetorical Situation,” explicitly named three elements when he wrote:

Prior to the creation and presentation of discourse, there are three constituents of any rhetorical situation: the first is the *exigence*; the second and third are elements of the complex, namely the *audience* to be constrained in decision and action, and the *constraints* which influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience. (1968, p. 6)

This view is too limited because it subsumes templates under the general category of constraint. In fact, templates add to our view of the rhetorical situation because they affect purpose and exigency by determining sets of choices for writers and audiences. Thus, they should be considered an element.

However, templates may not be a *discrete* element because the choices they determine are deeply intertwined with the choices made by a writer. When viewed as an element, templates call into question the source of rhetorical discourse: Is it the writer or the template that is the origin of rhetorical discourse? Some rhetorical scholarship can help posit a response to this question. Bitzer (1968) claimed the situation is rhetoric’s defining quality. A rhetorical situation is *rhetorical* when these three constituents—exigence, audience, and constraint—are at play in the situation. In this way, an objective rhetorical situation exists that calls for rhetorical analysis. Rhetorical situations exist as inherently rhetorical for Bitzer’s theory, which means that an individual’s response is determined by the situation. On the other hand, in “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” Richard Vatz (1973) advocated for a social construction of the rhetorical situation in that it is managed by individuals’ dispositions for a particular situation. He claimed, “The very choice of what facts or events are relevant is a matter of pure arbitration” (p. 157). Vatz believed that “[t]o the audience, events become meaningful only through their linguistic depiction,” which implies “. . . meaning is not discovered in situations, but created by rhetors” (1973, p. 157). Rhetoric, for Vatz, is defined by the rhetor; the rhetor decides which situations become rhetorical and ultimately receive attention. According to Vatz, the writer creates the rhetorical situation and is the origin of rhetorical discourse. The Bitzer-Vatz debate, thus, hinged on the origin of rhetorical discourse: situations or people.

I apply these ideas to the following question: Are writers or templates the source of rhetorical discourse in Web 2.0? On one hand, rhetorical discourse could emerge from templates, meaning the situation guides the production of rhetoric. In this case, the choices made by the writer are ignored when subject to analysis. On the other hand, rhetorical discourse could also emerge from the writer’s choices when filling in a template. In this latter circumstance, the coercive nature of templates is obscured when subject to analysis.

Barbara Biesecker (1989), in “Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of *Différance*,” sought to resolve this Bitzer-Vatz debate by turning to Derrida’s *différance*, which can also help resolve whether templates or writers (or both) are the origin of rhetorical discourse. *Différance* is not a concept or a word but an idea that implies both difference and deference, to differ and to defer. Derrida claimed *différance* makes meaning from an endless chain of signifiers. As such, meaning comes from additional words or ideas in order to differentiate and to defer meaning. Textually, words and ideas can never fully account for their meaning and are, therefore, incomplete without another word or idea with which to create a comparison. This process continually defers meaning. Biesecker’s argument, consequently, accounted “for the production of rhetorical texts” (1989, p. 115). Her account claimed:

The deconstructive displacement of questions of origin into questions of process frees rhetorical theorists and critics from reading rhetorical discourses and their “founding principles” as either the determined outcome of an objectively identifiable and discrete situation or an interpreting and intending subject. (1989, p. 121)

Biesecker freed rhetorical theorists from the Bitzer-Vatz debate because, conceptually, the rhetorical situation and the rhetor are no longer static but parts of a now-in-process, moving rhetorical triangle (writer, message, and audience). The debate is not solved but rather resolved because the situation and rhetor move, no longer static, reified, or homogenous terms or ideas. I believe we can apply Biesecker’s argument to templates and writers in Web 2.0. In this case, the template and writer are no longer standalone elements in the production of rhetoric. They cannot be so readily distinguished from one another, at least in terms of their rhetorical output.

Biesecker’s model destabilizes writer and template, showing that rhetorical discourse in Web 2.0 emerges from a variety of factors. But her model does not account for the complex processes that allow those factors to interact. In “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies,” Jenny Edbauer (2005) picked up Biesecker’s criticism¹ that much of the rhetorical situation is deeply rooted in “elemental conglomerations” and the idea that “rhetoric is a totality of discrete elements” (p. 7). Instead, she proposed, “we might also say that rhetorical situation is better conceptualized as a mixture of processes and encounters” (2005, p. 13). Edbauer’s model accounts for the “effects” and “concatenations” of local ecologies (2005, p. 22). This model is relevant to templates because it allows us to view the writer and template as inextricably linked, without discrete boundaries. In the context of Web 2.0 templates, rhetorical discourse can be seen as emerging not from a totality of elements but from a process of those elements (writer and template) interacting in unique and often unexpected ways. As such, the relationship between the template and writer in Web 2.0 is a moving, living rhetorical situation. In light of Biesecker’s argument, a writer and a template continually defer meaning to the other. In light of Edbauer’s argument, when writer and template are viewed as an “elemental conglomeration” and work together, meaningful rhetorical discourse emerges.

2. Making the template flexible

Although the previous scholarship helps see the relationship between writer and template as a moving, living process, templates in Web 2.0, nevertheless, *prescribe* the situation because they impose a form on the writer in regards to interface, medium, and design. Templates structure the situation. They are products of the computer programmers and individuals who design the layouts. These individuals can update and change the template, which implies the structure of the template *moves*. Seeing templates as moving reconceptualizes the template as a series of deferred meanings that exist in a series of signifiers. Templates provide meaning to writers, although that meaning only comes into existence when they fill in a template. Changes to Facebook’s template, for instance, might constitute this *deferred and moving meaning*; the software engineers might have a particular motivation for changing the template, but those changes only emerge as meaningful when writers fill in the template. Additional writers may then take up conventions either established by other writers or by the expected uses from the template’s creators. Accordingly, templates mediate what is *possible* between audience and writer by guiding and influencing their interactions. Templates enable and disable certain processes of production within a particular set of constraints that produce discursive practices. It is my contention that genre theory allows us to examine the ways writers communicate in Web 2.0 because it situates the conventions that emerge from a template as social discursive practices.

¹ Edbauer also picks up the rhetorical accounts of Louise Weatherbee Phelps (1988) as well as Smith and Lybarger (1996) on the same grounds (p. 8–9).

Genre theory can assist researchers to interpret the rhetorical discourse that emerges when writers fill in templates because it positions writers' rhetorical actions socially. Genre theory can situate templates in the social roles they play for writer and audience because genre study "emphasizes some social and historical aspects of rhetoric that other perspectives do not" (Miller, 1984, p.151). Using genre theory to examine templates would allow the *social* perspective of templates greater emphasis, thereby, accounting for the typified rhetorical action of interactive webtexts. The pre-structured design of the template casts the situation as typified because "[t]he typified situation, including typifications of participants, underlies typification in rhetoric. Successful communication would require that the participants share common types; this is possible insofar as types are socially created" (Miller, 1984, p. 157). Templates standardize the choices available to writers, as well as the behavior that arises from those choices. In the context of Web 2.0, writers and their audiences share similar choices and constraints for textual production and consumption because the template provides a platform, a starting point, from which writers make their choices for textual production. Writers who share a common template share constraints, though not necessarily rhetorical discourse. They partake in the structure of the template, though the template does not encourage specific rhetorical action. Instead, the template creates an underlying structure, a platform from which rhetorical discourse can emerge *depending on how the template is filled in*. In this way, rhetorical discourse is created when the writer fills in the template; the template by itself is a constraining prefabricated form.

Templates in this sense only provide a baseline series of choices for writers; those choices are extended and taken up by writers and their exigencies. Templates in Web 2.0 are designed to be filled in again and again. They are meant to be updated. The interactive nature of Web 2.0 templates shows that writers might make choices not based solely on the template's structure but on the way they see others using it and perhaps even to resist the choices provided by the template itself. In these situations, filling in a template arises from a social occurrence or perceived social need. I, therefore, argue that filling in a template fosters *recurring* rhetorical action in that "[r]ecurrence is an intersubjective phenomenon, a social occurrence, and cannot be understood on materialist terms" (Miller, 1984, p. 156). Filling in a Web 2.0 template does not occur in a vacuum: It occurs in the participatory world of other individuals, writers, and designers. Therefore, the need to fill in the templates as well as to edit and change what has been filled in previously is often created socially. As such, filling in a template, at least in the context of Web 2.0, fosters recurring rhetorical action.

While the writer partakes in recurring rhetorical action when filling in a template, that rhetorical action continually evolves because the template allows for fluidity within its prestructured design in that the choices it provides are neither definitive nor necessarily finite. Fluidity of this kind parallels the idea that genres are stable only in their historical and temporal contexts. For instance, in "The Lab versus the Clinic: Sites of Competing Genres," Catherine Schryer (1994) posited that genres were "stabilised-for-now or stabilised-enough" (p. 107). In *Genre*, John Frow (2006) picked up Schryer's notion of contextualized stability and coherency, noting, "Texts and genres exist in an unstable relation, but at any *one moment* [emphasis added] this relation is 'stabilised-for-now' or 'stabilised-enough'" (p. 28). Similarly, templates, like print text structures, consistently and constantly change in regards historical and temporal contexts. The designer of a template makes rhetorical choices based on and in response to situation and circumstance. Though templates are changed by the needs or wants of a designer, programmer, or even algorithm, designers and programmers may also adjust the template in response to the needs of the users. An individual may fill in the template in creative ways to manipulate it for his or her own purposes. In this way, the structure of a template can be unstable, although during an individual writing act, the structure is stabilized-for-now. While templates are more concrete in their layout and design than genres, templates and genres are fluid but stable-for-now because both adapt and change over time.

Templates are clearly not genres. However, in regards to web-writing—such as social networking, blogging, and writing on other websites that do not require an ability to program computer code—templates play a significant role in shaping social norms and expectations for writing in the sense that they provide a shared platform for rhetorical action to occur. In Web 2.0, they lay the framework for genres to emerge. This is similar to Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd's conclusion, "That aesthetic power [of the blogging medium] produces a situated decorum that helps stabilize the churning volatility of the internet—if only briefly—thus making genres possible" (2009, p. 286). To this, I would add that templates create the context out of which the blogging medium emerges. If the blogging medium produces decorum for genres to emerge, then templates play a constraining role in shaping that medium. Accordingly, templates enable and disable the emergence of certain kinds of decorum through the range of choices available to the writer and the programmers' response to perceived social need.

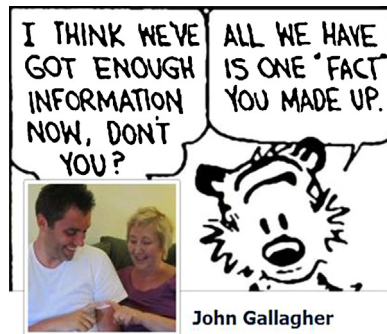


Figure 1. Example of profile and cover picture that do not make reference to each other, standing independently.

Genre theory helps to understand the role of Web 2.0 templates because it considers the conventions writers employ as socially, historically, and temporally situated. Genres influence culture through sets of discursive, semiotic, and cultural conventions. In a similar fashion, templates influence the writer by providing sets of prestructured designs that can establish particular conventions by guiding the writer. They have coercive power in particular social, historical, and temporal contexts. But writers can bring their own contexts to bear upon the template. In this way, writers play a role in shaping the template's conventions. Consequently, using genre theory, in regard to the templates of Web 2.0, illustrates that filling in a template may be flexible in unintended ways.

3. The rhetorical template

Let me use personal examples in Web 2.0 to demonstrate ways writers can use templates flexibly. I specifically choose Facebook for two reasons. First, it is the most dominant social media website. It has the most subscribers of any Web 2.0 site. Second, examining Facebook deliberately attends to Arola's contention:

Because [Facebook's template] 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. (2010, p. 9)

It is my contention that Facebook's template only allows interface to fade into the background if the template is not being viewed as a rhetorical tool. If looked at as tool with specific affordances that are addressed and utilized, Facebook's template becomes instrumental in creating a dynamic process of textual production and self-representation. Thus, these examples focus exclusively on Facebook's template.

On profile pages, Facebook's template allows writers to upload what it calls a "profile" picture and a "cover" picture. Facebook's template implies, through labeling, the profile picture should be of the writer whereas the cover picture ought to be something broader: Panoramic scenes like sunsets, group photos, and general activities are common. Although templates encourage writers to upload many kinds of pictures, possibilities exist for the relationship between these two fields that Facebook's template does not necessarily promote. In [Figure 1](#), the inset picture is the profile picture, and the larger picture is the cover picture. My profile picture, of my mother and me touching fingers E.T.-style, does not reference the humorous Calvin and Hobbes cover picture. The pictures are close to one another spatially but have little to do with one another contextually. This picture creates a fun profile persona, something for which I intentionally strive. However, the picture does not make use of the template rhetorically.

The two pictures in [Figure 2](#) establish a clear relationship in which each picture can stand alone, but they produce modifications to the social expectations and conventions established by Facebook's template. [Figure 2](#) has the same cover picture but a different profile picture; this profile picture, of me looking upwards, shows an awareness of Facebook's template because the two pictures are now intertwined in their meaning because they reference each other. Each picture combines into a larger picture. *Placement*, or in more rhetorical terms *arrangement*, is, therefore, crucial to producing a savvy rhetorical identity within this template. [Figure 2](#) uses the template rhetorically. The profile picture in [Figure 2](#) generates new meaning by referencing the design of the template. Each individual picture forms a larger stabilized-for-now picture. Neither the individual picture nor the combined one, however, manipulate the template in a way that changes design *structure*. But the combined picture creates different social expectations from the standard way



Figure 2. Example of profile and cover images referencing each other to work synergistically.

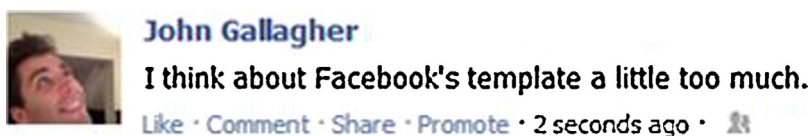


Figure 3. Example of a standard status update.

of uploading a profile and cover photo. The cover picture now enhances the profile picture because the dialogue bubble now appears like it is a thought. The two pictures work together and realize the full potential in a temporary union. This union is also an expectation of Facebook's template: Writers will constantly and consistently update their profile. The meaning of the larger picture arises from *différance* in that the form produces a meaning deferred to each and in the difference of each. In other words, the two pictures themselves do not hold the meaning. The new, combined picture arises from specific placement and arrangement. Figure 2, therefore, undercuts the form and content split because form is inextricably linked to the content; the design of Figure 2 forms content and makes meaning. Placement and arrangement produce a new text despite of, and perhaps because of, the coercive nature of a template.

Combining pictures to form new meaning is not unique to templates, but what makes this significant is that the template's conventions cut across a website's format often in uncontrollable and even inconsistent ways. For instance, Figure 3 shows the profile picture without the cover picture. The template separates them because it views the two pictures as distinctly separate. The form and content split, at least in this example of Facebook, creates multiple situations that bleed into each other, similar to what Edbauer (2005) claimed. One rhetorically savvy choice might make for a not-so-clever choice in another view of Facebook's template. While my profile picture remains the same, it is placed in a new situation as determined by the template, namely Facebook's "status update." Not only does the picture in Figure 3 lose the meaning it once had in Figure 2, but it also fades as an aspect of the interface. The picture and even its label, my name in this case, are considered less important than the text itself. The meaning of my name and picture become placeholders, devoid of content, except as a label that identifies my "status update." How then do I as a writer make this version of the template more rhetorical?

The status update in Figure 3 implies a separation between the form and content, whereas Figure 4 sees a union between the form and content. The template is no different between the figures; if a writer can do something within a template, then it is anticipated, though not necessarily encouraged, by the template. The difference between these two figures is writer's *interpretation* of the template's uses. Figure 4 shows an awareness of Facebook's template and that design is part of the message. For Figure 4, as in Figure 2, form is part of the content. Another example of this rhetorical awareness, as many of my students point out, is to directly address the template, as shown in Figure 5.



Figure 4. Example of a status update that does not view the template field as discrete.

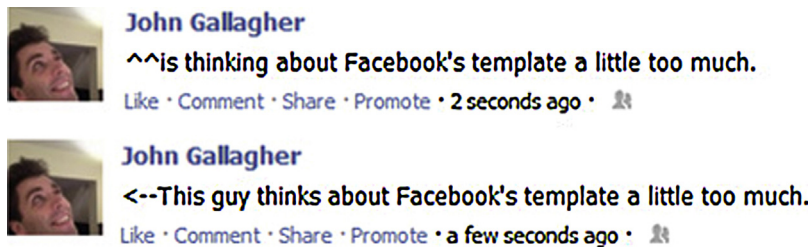


Figure 5. Two status updates showing awareness of Facebook's template design. In the upper image, “^^^” symbols point in reference to the writer's name. In the lower image, the “<--” symbols make reference to the writer's profile image.

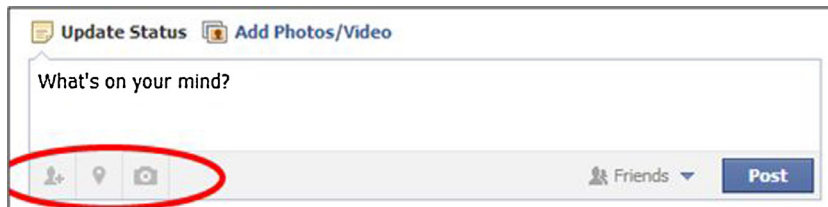


Figure 6. An empty field waiting to be updated. The three buttons, in order of left to right, add a person, location, or picture/video.

Figure 5 demonstrates the most explicit textual awareness of the template. The examples illustrate that the fields of the template's structure can be linked to filling in those fields. The split between form and content is not as severe in Figure 5 (and Figure 4) compared to Figure 3. While writers in Web 2.0 “remain limited to the predetermined options” (Arola, 2010, p. 7), Figure 5 shows that some of those options may be flexible and subject to various levels of manipulation. In other words, writers have flexibility when filling in Facebook's template, albeit in a constricted way. These figures de-compartmentalize the template. The individual elements move into one another, while still constrained by the design of programmers. The template, when viewed as a tool, can make the predefined status update that much more dynamic.

Other examples of rhetorical “status updates” call attention to other writers in unanticipated ways. A newer feature of the Facebook template, developed in the past few years, enables writers to update their location and the people they are with. Figure 6 shows the status field, and Figure 7 is an example of updating my status to reflect my feelings and identity, rather than my location. Figure 7 illustrates I miss my mother (Karen Holmes), and I use the template to communicate a point more rhetorically. These rhetorically savvy screenshots demonstrate that while a writer in Facebook may be subject to various constraints, some of those constraints can be challenged. Figures 2, 4, 5, and 7 provide counterexamples to Arola's argument that profiles “are constructed in social networking sites by *simply* [emphasis added] filling out a series of online forms” (2010, p. 8). In fact, more flexibility exists when creating a Facebook post than Arola's argument implies. When Arola stated, “[t]he content posted in these forms—including uploaded photos and information about the writer—is then displayed within a predefined template” (2010, p.8), such a strict interpretation does not account for a writer's ability to see the way various fields of a template will interact in the overall design. These figures show that writers do not have to simply accept the design of Facebook's template. Though still constrained, writers can develop innovative practices to establish a more dynamic rhetoric in Web 2.0.



Figure 7. An updated status that adds a person whom I am *not* with. It is a rhetorical use of the template in order to express my emotional state using the site's prestructured design.

I want to make one qualification in this argument that is relevant to genre theory. I did not come up with these ideas on my own. Rather, I saw other people on Facebook with whom I am “friends” employing these conventions and took them up (I purposely avoid the word “uptake” to avoid a misappropriation of the word). The conventions on Facebook did not necessarily emerge from discursive practices, which would align with genre theory. However, the template of Facebook is not solely responsible for the social conventions on the social network. I argue that, especially in light of the continuous nature of the template, the conventions arose from *both* the template *and* the discursive practices of using the template. Although genre theory is not typically applied to templates, it does offer valuable insights into ways that writers form social conventions that future studies about templates should investigate.

4. Complicating the relationship between template and writer

An important question arises from the thorny conundrum as to whether the conventions of Web 2.0 websites emerge from a template or writers using a template: To what extent can the writer produce an authentic text within the permeating influence of a template? An important parallel between the constraints of a template and literary criticism exists that can help resolve this question. Literary criticism is not limited to what the author says about a text in the same way that criticism of the template is not limited to the intended use of the template. A narrative may be altered by the author, but many subtle interpretations typically emerge from the text. A rift exists between the author’s intentions and the text. Likewise, writers can indeed undercut the intended use of the template, even if they cannot challenge the programmed design of the template. In fact, writers may not know the intended design of the template. Although filling in a form might be more coercive than interpreting a literary text, using templates in innovative and subversive ways ought to be encouraged in the writing classroom, especially as the proliferation of online writing, inside and outside of the classroom, increases in professional and personal lives. Such innovation and subversion will help to give students access to a broader available means of persuasion when writing in Web 2.0. It will also assist students in seeing the intended and unintended possibilities of using a template.

Examining the differences between these intended and unintended uses of the template illustrates a nuanced way of understanding *intention*. A program designer has a specific way of seeing intended use. The intentions of a designer, then, are limited, circumscribed in the designer’s imagination. Intended uses of a template, however, are imbricated in the writer’s use of the template’s possible uses. While the writer can use the template in a way that the designer may not have intended, the writer always uses the template in a way that the template enables. The intention of the template is never fully formulated until the writer has completed filling in the template. Any choice the writer makes that reaches an audience is guided and constrained by the template; any possible choice the writer can make, therefore, is a choice offered by the template.

That a template enables possible choices for a writer does not preclude the production of an authentic text, however. For instance, as I demonstrated in the previous section, unexpected or unforeseen uses of a template exist; this mere possibility confirms that using a template, especially in Web 2.0, can produce texts that manipulate a template to increase the range of ways one can represent oneself. As a writer in the templated world of Web 2.0, I might not have a host of discursive affordances, but I do have options as long as I am aware that a template is an element for which I need to account. The idea that writers have to consider medium-determined options in how they represent themselves authentically is not new.

Although the scale of the audience for writers in Web 2.0 may be different, writers who use the templates of Web 2.0 may not struggle any more with the split between form and content than previous writers struggled with new mediums. The forms of the book, novel, poetry, and even the 8.5” × 11” standard print academic essay continually shape the very nature of an argument. The split between form and content is not new nor is the problematic way that templates shape content new. Books and written work have had a very particular influence on shaping arguments and self-representation; even in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates worried about deleterious effects writing would have on memory and the construction of an argument.

What then is new about Web 2.0 templates? Because these templates are socially interactive, I posit that templates provide writers with an array of possibilities that may not even exist as possibilities until a writer fills in the prefabricated form. A template is never complete without a writer. A template cannot exist without a writer, at least not in any meaningful way. The emergence of new mediums, like the internet, have always necessitated creative approaches to embracing the affordances of new mediums *and* developing creative ways to rekindle what was lost from older

mediums. Although templates may erase many choices of design, I have argued that possible design choices still remain through creative subversion and innovation. Having students reflect on templates in Web 2.0 would aid their understanding of these possibilities so that they would be able to communicate more dynamically and effectively in online contexts.

5. Templates in the classroom

This section seeks to emphasize the design choices available within a template in the context of a writing classroom. Accordingly, this section addresses pedagogical concerns that extend Arola's call to "change the shape of our students' discursive consciousness and rhetorical awareness" as well as to "experiment with design" by illustrating what template innovation, interpretation, and subversion might look like in the classroom (2010, p. 12). What follows is a sample project I assign to my students. Its goal is twofold. First, it asks students to consider the template as part of their online communication in an active manner. Second, the assignment asks students to make an attempt to use the template in a way that may be unexpected. This latter part offers student the opportunity to see design, layout, and arrangement as part of content. It shows that even if a template offers a staid number of choices, those choices can be placed in concert with each other. I encourage students to takes risks when interpreting the template; I challenge them to see their choices as subversive in an attempt to escape coercion.

The assignment is titled "Examining the Template on the Internet." The following is a sample of the project.

This assignment asks you to examine some of the writing you produce on the internet. For this assignment, writing can include any word-based or visual-based texts you create. In order to complete this project, I will ask you to use a screen-capture program—either the free program, Jing, or any number of available free programs. These pictures will act as your textual evidence. You can examine any social networking site, blog, or other site in which you write. The goal of this assignment, in addition to allowing you to reflect on your own internet activity, is to examine in what ways your online activity is constrained by a template. By template, I mean a design form that can be filled in. These forms are predesigned in the sense that the design and layout are predetermined. For instance, when updating a Facebook status, the writer's picture appears in that update in a way that a writer cannot control (in the upper left corner, in this case). The template, in this way, constrains the layout of a Facebook profile. The official writing assignment for this project is two-fold.

- 1) Write a 750-1500 word reflection, based on three or more screenshots, about how the template affects what you write, post, and upload in terms of your online activity. Some questions to consider include the following:
 - a. What expectations do other people have of your activity?
 - b. Why do they have these expectations?
 - c. What are typical ways that you write to other people online? Do you ever write in unexpected ways or share unexpected information? How do people react to these unexpected situations?
 - d. In what ways have you been dissatisfied with the design and layout of your internet writing? If you could, what would you change?

- 2) Adjust some of the template's settings, upload pictures, or write in ways that violate social norms or expectations for the template. For instance, you could upload a picture to a profile that references another picture [a picture of [Figure 2](#) is pasted in the assignment]. I'd like you to take at least two screenshots of this ATTEMPT and write a 500+ word reflection about this process. The following are some questions to consider:
 - a. How successful do you consider your writing when you try to manipulate the template?
 - b. What do you think is helpful about filling in a template? What is not so helpful?
 - c. In general, what is your reaction to this assignment? Has it helped you to critically examine the template?
 - d. How important was the template for your internet activity before this assignment? Afterwards?

In an effort to contextualize this assignment, I have students read and discuss Arola's argument, as well as encourage extensive class discussions of the own online activity. We capture screenshots to facilitate these discussions.

Student responses run a gamut. Some find the assignment incredibly engrossing whereas others have already thought in-depth about templates in their Web 2.0 activity. Active class discussion can be grouped, for the most part, around three topics. First, students talk about websites changing their templates. In this instance, students usually voice their displeasure over the need to adapt to a new layout and design. In the context of this assignment, however, new templates offer students opportunities to innovate strategies for template manipulation. Next, students often compare templates from different websites. This often results in an entertaining discussion about the purpose of different writing acts and the way that writers use templates with diverse expectations and purposes. Recently, students have taken to comparing the templates of Tumblr and Facebook in order to discuss visual patterns. This is relevant to the assignment because we discuss the ways writers, even in the templates of Web 2.0, create discursive practices. Lastly, we address privacy issues. Students are sometimes recalcitrant to take screenshots of their activity for class because they do not wish to share their activity with a classroom instructor. In these situations, I allow them to use publicly accessible Web 2.0 writing as an object of analysis. In class, we discuss ways to make screenshots appropriate for the assignment. For instance, I encourage students to consider blurring out the names and pictures of others individuals when they take screenshots. More broadly, I ask them to think about where their online activity begins and the activity of another individual ends. Further, we discuss the coercive privacy settings of the template, settings of which nearly every student is aware. This aspect of the discussion shows that students are aware of the template because it acts as a portal for who can and cannot see their online activity. Students, from my classroom experience, are aware of the template and often seek out ways to use it dynamically. They simply need the opportunity to make that awareness explicit.

6. The writer and the template

Although Web 2.0 templates can be restrictive, they also present new possibilities for textual meaning. In order to flesh out these possibilities, we should further investigate the cognitive process that occurs when writers use templates meant for continuous use. Templates not in Web 2.0 are filled in and filled up to the point of creating a complete product. For example, a template form for a resume is designed to allow full transfer of the document's contents. But templates in Web 2.0 are never fully complete. In social media, a template is designed to allow for constant updating. Even in a blog, unless the comment section is disabled, the possibility of new comments from responders exists, meaning the text can be updated without limit. This continuous nature of templates in Web 2.0 demonstrates that self-representation and presentation are never fully formed. They are in the process of *becoming*, to take a phrase from Biesecker (1989). Rhetorical situations in Web 2.0 require constant attention. They are never solved, but in the process of being solved. Writers bring their own knowledge to bear on templates and templates bring a constraining structure to the writer's knowledge. Comparing various templates in Web 2.0 may shed light on the way that prefabricated designs shape knowledge—and the way knowledge shapes prefabricated design. In Web 2.0, the ontology of a template, then, will shape a writer's epistemology. But, as I have tried to show, the writer's epistemology can, while not always, shape a template's ontology. This process, like all writing processes, is non-linear and recursive.

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