The Places of Writing
on the Multimodal Page

Matthew Davis and Alex Mueller

The page has always been multimodal, accommodating varying verbal
and nonverbal elements from illustration to punctuation, but the mass
reproduction and conventionalization of its layout, its accepted fonts,
and its thin margins have given writing its pride of place on the printed
page. In Sigrid Norris’s terms, writing carries a high “modal intensity” on
the printed page: it serves as the primary mode of meaning-making, car-ries the majority of the semiotic weight, commands attention, and struc-tures interaction with other modes (83). We can recognize the varying
levels of intensity of many other nonverbal modes across printed pages
in books or student essays but the vast majority of printed pages we en-
counter are dominated by writing. In fact, as contributors to this volume
hasten to point out, the extreme degree of the modal intensity of alpha-
betic text has led to the mistaken characterization of print culture as
monomodal, as if nonalphabetic ways of making meaning on the page
have disappeared from view.

To punctuate the error, John Trimbur and Karen Press argue that
“print culture is as thoroughly multimodal in its practices of text produc-
tion as the present digital age, though in different ways, with different
effects, accomplished by different means” (22). While Trimbur and Press
helpfully recognize the limits of using the term multimodal to character-
ize conceptual differences of communication over time, their argument
does not account for what Norris would call the “modal complexity,” or
the level of intricacy of the relations between multiple modes (79). As
Bruce Horner argues forcefully in his essay in this volume, the usefulness
of multimodality for analysis is extremely limited when it is reduced to
counting modes within a given text. By calling a page multimodal, then,
we are not referring to the fact that on any given page we can count more
than one mode. Instead, we follow Gunther Kress’s sense of modes as those socially constructed and materially available resources for making meaning through space and time (79–81). Modes are neither fully isolatable from one another nor fully reducible to one another. In analysis, then, we prefer not to count modes—as if that were possible—but instead to think about the waxing and waning complexity of the interrelations among ways of representing meaning. In this essay, we focus on those interrelations as they appear on the page—a culturally available space for representing meaning and shaping human textual attention. Within read-write digital platforms, for example, this modal complexity is often extremely high, offering multiple modes of interaction through sound files, video illustration, and even space for readerly annotation. And while some printed contexts exhibit such high levels of modal intensity, we want to suggest that the page has not been as multimodally complex since the Middle Ages, before the age of the mass-produced, printed book.

Prior to the advent of the printing press, the page—the medieval manuscript page—was often complexly multimodal, containing elaborate scripts, rubrications, and illuminations; the medieval page was a multimedia experience for its community of readers, viewers, and listeners (Carruthers; Mak). Both writing and the page are, and always were, visual: rendered in multicolored acrostics, historiated initials, and varying sizes of script (Mitchell; Drucker, Graphesis). In this essay, we argue that the knowledge of this history compels us to orient our reading and writing pedagogy newly to the page, particularly its design elements: not just images and text but the entire mise-en-page, the layout, the arrangement, and the spaces for annotation and interaction. Digital texts—particularly within development of Web 2.0 text technologies—have reinvigorated our attention to the page as a site of multimodality (Shipka; Wysocki; Yancey). In terms of modal complexity, the digital page is multimodal in ways the printed page cannot be: in its speed and scale of activity and its coordination of audio, moving image, and responsive design. But what comparing these historical moments shows even more clearly is that the page is now a place that enables forms of textual activity both new and old: clicking, scrolling, reading, embedding, interacting, commenting, annotating.

For Johanna Drucker, this recognition of digital page design as a visual and dynamic form of knowledge production means that “we face
the challenge of reading interface as an object and of understanding it as a space that constitutes reading as an activity” (“Reading Interface” 213). Just as medieval scribes, rubricators, and illuminators designed the page with future glossators and commentators in mind, digital com-

posers must consider page designs as interfaces that both facilitate the elegant reading of their alphabetic text and invite the interactions of future readers. The teaching of composition, then, must prepare students to consider carefully the visual, spatial, and aural dimensions of the page as a multimodal interface. To some extent, this pedagogical orientation requires the “design thinking” advocated by Derek Owens and Tara Roeder (in this volume), but rather than challenge the modal or institutional supremacy of writing, we call for a renewed focus on the design of writing, both in the consumption and production of pages. While such a pedagogy culminates in the student creation and design of multimodal interfaces, this essay argues for increased attention to the reading and analysis of the places of writing on the page, tracing its history as both a visual image and a space for readerly activity from medieval classroom manuscripts to first-generation Web sites to annotation platforms.

The Places of Writing on the Preprinted Page

As Alberto Manguel cleverly puts it, “Like a skeleton supporting the skin of the text, the page disappears in its very function, and in that unprepos-

sessing nature lies its strength” (120). In the midst of flipping through the average printed book, magazine, or student essay, it is often easy to forget about the page, which has become so naturalized as an interface for reading that we rarely stop to notice its features. It is only when we encounter an awkward or unconventional page layout that we awaken to what Manguel calls “the page’s tyranny” (123): the visual limitations of textual display, which dictate presentational features from the size of the font to the spaces for margins. By allowing for bottomless pages, expand-

able text, and hypertext navigation, digital environments promise to free us from this oppression, but it only takes a few clicks to arrive at a Web site that is nearly unnavigable in its labyrinthishine architecture. To resolve this problem of eye scatter, graphical user interface designers create text columns that are approximately thirty characters in width, thereby maxi-

mizing readability and minimizing scrolling (Vandendorpe 136–42). The effect of this practice is not only a remediation of the printed newspaper,
which has always used columns for efficiency and space, but also a return to the pagina.

The pagina was not a page but rather an eight-to-twelve-centimeter-wide block of writing on a papyrus scroll, designed to be read aloud from top to bottom as it was unrolled. Once the codex book arrived in the first century CE, the pagina became a feature of the page, retaining its lanky shape but often in duplicate form, as two columns side by side (Mak 4). Because the codex additionally freed one hand, which had been previously required to hold the scroll to turn the discrete leaves of the book, these folios eventually absorbed the paginæ they hosted, becoming what we now definitively call pages (Vandendorpe 135–36). The emancipated hand also had the luxury to assume a new occupation, glossing: inscribing annotations between lines or into the margins of the page. In the twelfth century, this phenomenon led to a further innovation of the placement and size of columns, which varied according to space reserved for readerly commentary. As Malcolm Parkes has suggested, this development introduced a design challenge that compelled medieval authors and commentators to create an organization of subject matter (ordinatio) on the page that would make the texts easier to consult, read, and annotate. Ordinatio was often accomplished through the precise placement of rubrics, red-lettered or underlined words or phrases that would offer guidance to the reader seeking chapter titles, source citations, or even particular parts of an argument (Parkes 36–58). For Ivan Illich, this development means that “[t]he visual page is no longer the record of speech but the visual representation of a thought-through argument” (99). Through this transformation, the page becomes more than a script for oral performance: it becomes a visual object that absorbs the text as merely one aspect of its pictorial repertoire.

In addition to enhancing the visuality of writing, medieval manuscripts were often produced with the anticipation of readerly interventions and additions. This orientation to the future of the book resulted in page layouts that either included wide margins for the insertion of annotations or large sections of the page left vacant for extensive commentary. These pages then became spaces for potential accretion, designed for the use of additional text creators who could mark and recirculate the page to yet other readers to continue the cycle. This attention to the delivery of the page is what Jim Ridolfo and Dânielle Nicole DeVoss call “rhetorical velocity,” or “the strategic theorizing for how a text might be
recomposed (and why it might be recomposed) by third parties, and how this recomposing may be useful or not to the short- or long-term rhetorical objectives of the rhetorician.” While Ridolfo and DeVoss are primarily describing the digital forms of delivery that consider the future appropriation, remix, and redistribution of material online, this design consideration was also central to preprinted environments such as the manuscript page.

While the salience of this point could be made with the commentary traditions of a number of theological texts, such as the Glossa Ordinaria, or legal books, such as the Decretum, we have selected one canon of pedagogical texts, Aesop’s fables, as a representative example for analysis. These tales of animals are known for their moral lessons, but they were primarily used in medieval classrooms for reading and writing instruction. Students and teachers would insert interlinear glosses, usually Latin synonyms, to challenge their expanding vocabulary and then rewrite these fables, both in abbreviated and elaborated forms. Most crucially, though, students and teachers appended extensive commentaries to fables in their manuscripts, which regularly occupied more space on the page than the fables themselves. While such an emphasis on textual amplification encouraged readerly additions, many manuscripts reached a saturation point at which the accommodation of commentary caused the page to become flooded with textual annotation.

The transition to print in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries reflects how writers and printers developed new page formats and organizational features that dispelled much of the confusion caused by such an emphasis on rhetorical velocity. In the case of Aesop’s fables, the widely various and dynamic commentary tradition became reduced to a single commentary, the Aesopus moralizatus, which eventually transformed fable reading into an exercise in abbreviation, not amplification. The Aesopus moralizatus contains academic commentaries that provide both moral and allegorical interpretations between, and sometimes in the margin of, each fable (fig. 1). The Aesopus moralizatus’s accommodation of interpretation within the text itself reflects the long-standing medieval practice of allocating adequate space in the margins of the manuscript page for glosses and commentary by teachers or students. The printed versions of the Aesopus moralizatus, however, reproduce one canonical commentary, which is in great contrast to the variety of commentaries that exist in the manuscripts of their medieval predecessors.
The prospect of printing unruly and lengthy commentaries, which often appeared in the margins, between lines, and even between selections of text, was surely formidable and it is no surprise that printers chose more manageable and standardized layouts for their editions (Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop* 62). Just as the accumulation, circulation, and replication of fables had been more volatile, so too had been the fables' interpretations. In fact, the commentary of the earlier medieval classroom often displaced the fables themselves. For example, in one mid-fifteenth-century manuscript, *Codex Clastroneoburgensis 1093*, the commentary that accompanies the *elegiac Romulus* is so lengthy that it overwhelms the fables inscribed in the middle of the pages (fig. 2). Even the prologue to the fables had to be divided into two parts to accommodate the effusive exegeses (fol. 350v–352r). This excessive emphasis on commentary is so widespread in the existing manuscripts that it is reasonable to conclude that the *elegiac Romulus* was composed specifically for the pedagogical production of classroom commentaries (Wheatley, “*Fabulae*”; Wright xvii–xviii). If this is the case, the text serves the commentary, overturning the standard assumption that interpretation is extraneous to its object. In the case of the medieval fable, the commentary completes the text.

While early printers worked valiantly to accommodate such Aesopic amplification, the demand to create editions that were mass-produced, readable, reproducible, and cost-effective led to the attenuation of the social function and annotative authority of the fabular reader. The pages of printed books reduced the spaces previously open for future commentary and the eventual inheritors of medieval manuscripts regularly cut off the margins of books altogether when they were rebound. This compromise has resulted in a textually dominant and uniform design of the page that is almost completely determined by authors, editors, publishing companies, and software designers, which has in turn meant that the features of the page have become increasingly shaped by the pages’ value as commodified objects for individuals to consume, not produce. By eliminating future readers as amplifiers of the page, printed text has come to pervade the page, so much so that such writing spaces are now considered to be monomodal. As Trimbur and Press suggest, such characterizations of print as monomodal are ideological claims that occlude the inherent multimodality of alphabetic text (21). We recall this prehistory of the printed page, however, to emphasize that the ideology of monomodality
emerges from specific material conditions, which often make unavailable a rich array of composing modes previously available in the shared culture of medieval books—from visual markers, such as manicules that refer future readers to key passages and invite commentary, to marginal apparatus, such as rubricated citations and key terms that facilitate hypertextual connections within and across texts. And while multimodality may represent its own neoliberal ideologies of innovation and countable objects of design (see Horner’s essay in this volume), the material conditions of digital pages make available social modes of readerly interaction, like amplification and annotation, which are high-speed and large-scale extensions of practices that predate the age of print. This historical context is crucial to consider because digital pages face the same dilemma as printed pages: How can the page accommodate readerly additions and also maintain readability? Put another way, How might we encourage designs of the page in which the page’s elements remain objects of critical inquiry and visual forms of knowledge production?

The Places of Writing on the Digital Page

As we have outlined, Drucker’s charge to read the printed page as an interface—as both an object and a space (“Reading Interface”)—illuminates how the page constitutes, invites, and limits readerly writing as activity. Reading the page as an interface can also illustrate how it constitutes and invites a writerly reading experience: a place for the remediation of writing and of the printed page. Such a transformation of the page also remaps readerly attention according to the modal affordances of old and new media (Bolter and Grusin).

This remediation and transformation is evident in Welcome to Pine Point, a 2011 webtext by The Goggles (Michael Simons and Paul Shoebridge), which was sponsored by the National Film Board of Canada. The webtext has been variously described as an “interactive web documentary” (“Welcome”), a “cross-platform project . . . and an interactive documentary” (Simons and Shoebridge), and a “liquid book” (Pitzer). It tells the story of Pine Point, an abandoned Canadian mining town in the Northwest Territories, which was built ex nihilo for mining purposes in the 1950s, flourished as a small mining town in the 1970s, and—after the mine was depleted—was closed and abandoned in 1988. The story of Pine Point is moving and emotional, staging in turns the joys
of small-town life, the hardships that boom-and-bust extraction capitalism wreaks on human life, and the nostalgia that townspeople have for their shared pasts. *Welcome to Pine Point* is built from materials found on *Pine Point Revisited*, a Web site by a former resident of the town, Richard Cloutier. The original Web site archives the history of Pine Point in Web 1.0 fashion (fig. 3).

The interactive documentary, *Welcome to Pine Point*, on the other hand, is a text of remarkable multimodal intensity and complexity: fluid, interactive, and responsive design that incorporates amateur video and old news footage, music and music videos, found and recorded audio, voiceovers, interviews, audio and textual overlays, animated text and images, linear and nonlinear navigation, government documents, and old photos, among other materials. Both the original Web site and the interactive documentary are assemblages—in most cases, assemblages of many of the same materials. But given the different experiences of the webtexts (that is, if our reactions and our students’ reactions to them are indicative of differences), we argue that the two texts function both similarly and differently as objects and as spaces that constitute writing and reading as an activity; this similarity and difference is built through the use of multimodality to construct the page as a phenomenon for directing and addressing attention. Here, we attend to the modal complexity and intensity in both works—on the construction, reconstruction, and remediation of the page—to understand how these pages constitute different objects that create different kinds of reading experiences, and also function as spaces that invite different kinds of textual activity.

There are two versions of the home page of *Pine Point Revisited*, and both transport users to an earlier era of Web page design (pinepointrevisited.homestead.com; pinepointrevisited.homestead.com/Pine_Point.html). Upon loading, a left-side navigation bar links to multiple pages that house picture galleries, donation and memorial pages, and an address book that in both form and function resembles a database. On one version (updated 2 Aug. 2012) some pages are marked with yellow and red GIFs highlighting them as “new”; on the other (updated 27 Aug. 2015) the colors are muted and the GIFs are gone. The site visit counters differ on each page as well. Both versions mix image borders, image types, and fonts in configurations almost totally absent from the current moment of standardized design. In other words, the layout is not generic in our current sense, its modal complexity much different than the templates that currently guide most amateur (and much professional) page design.
And neither is its design responsive to device or scaling. On the home page and elsewhere on the site, one navigates with substantial scrolling; in terms of structure, all pages are centrally linked on the home page—one must always navigate back through that hub. The site has no sound, and the only moving images are the flashing yellow and red GIFs on the older version (fig. 3). Compare that to the page from Welcome to Pine Point shown in figure 4 (though the interactivity of the page is impossible to capture in a still image). In it appears a book—a remediation of a book—representing a Web site composed of digitized print materials. There is a redesign of the navigation bar (lower left), which is itself a remediation of a printed table of contents. This navigational aid hides itself from the experience of the page but pops up when the viewer hovers over it—making all sections equally accessible during each moment of reading and viewing (ironically, much the same way that sections are always equally accessible in a print book). As one reads and navigates the page, slow, soft music (the theme song of the documentary) plays on repeat in the background. The page evidences not only heightened multimodal complexity—including modes unavailable in print—but also increased modal intensity. Through interactivity, the page here becomes less a place for a staging of specific multimodal interactions and more a space for a constrained set of multimodal possibilities. One’s navigation of the web-page determines which of those possibilities actualizes on the page.

Just as the content of the home page of Pine Point Revisited remediated and transformed into more intense and complex multimodal relations in Welcome to Pine Point, the visual representations of the people of the town are similarly transformed. Pine Point Revisited contains a number of gallery pages, where each image is clickable and reveals another gallery. On the page shown in figure 5, the first fifteen images of the “people of Pine Point” link to galleries with additional sets of captioned images—the full set including hundreds of digitized photos. The final three images—numbered 16, 17, and 18—are identical to each other and do not link to additional galleries. There is neither sound nor moving images, though a few flashing GIFs do proclaim some images or galleries are “new.” The overall effect of the page, then, is of a set of materials meticulously curated and annotated, but without much attention to accessible design.

Contrast this with the remediated and interactive photo album pages from Welcome to Pine Point (fig. 6). Embedded within the page design are images from the Pine Point Revisited galleries, recontextualized among
each other depending on what the reader-viewer clicks and in what order. The experience of the (remediated) pages depends on reader interactivity. When the reader-viewer clicks back and forth across the photo album page, the click is accompanied by the exaggerated sound of a printed page turning; the theme song continues to play on repeat and the noises of people having a party—sounds of people mingling, voices hooting, bottles clinking together—play for the first twenty seconds or so.

The point in comparing these two texts is not to laud one while denigrating the other. Nor is it to make the case that more multimodality is better. Instead, the point is to illustrate the ways that digital pages construct readerly and writerly attention through multimodal intensity and complexity. There’s a hint to this link on the About This Project page of Welcome to Pine Point: “This was supposed to be a book.” It is, of course, not a book. But what it is remains somewhat up in the air. When asked in an interview, “What is this thing?,” Shoebridge replies: “Because we were book guys, we kept a lot of the old handmade book-like things, in keeping with that medium-is-the-message concept. We tried to emphasize what each medium does well. Keeping the words as writing rather than voiceover narrative was something we wrestled with at the start, but I think we’re happy we kept it as words” (Pitzer). Here Shoebridge is using “medium” in the way that we use mode—hence his indicating writing and voiceover as separate media. Differences of vocabulary aside, his remarks point up the ways the creators purposefully constructed the modal intensities and complexities offered in new media environments, particularly as operationalized through the remediation and transformation of the book. In addition, for them, this work is done by looking to historical precedent—the book, the page—to construct their webtext.

So what—or where—is the pagina here? Welcome to Pine Point is certainly not the wide block of writing on a papyrus scroll, nor particularly the printed page, though it incorporates elements of both. Is it fitting to say that the screen has absorbed the page, the way folios eventually absorbed the paginae they hosted? And, if so, how do we use the history of the page to learn to read new interface objects and accept new invitations for textual activity?

**Pedagogies of the Page**

We argue that the knowledge of the history of the page—difficult, partial, and in flux though it may be—compels us to orient our writing peda-
gogy newly to textual design elements: not just to individual modes but to purposeful engagement with modal intensity and complexity. With our students, we must attend to the entire mise-en-page, layout, the arrangement, and the spaces for readerly and writerly interaction that our texts might construct. Just as medieval scribes, rubricators, and illuminators designed the page with future glossators and commentators in mind, digital composers must consider designs that facilitate both the elegant reading of their alphabetic text and rhetorical velocity. Here, we illustrate how digital annotation—one kind of engagement with the page, inflected through the material and social affordances of Web 2.0 technology—involves students in the history of and possible futures for the multimodal page.

The affordances of Web 2.0 technology that enable users to annotate—that is, append writing, image, or video to existing texts, images, or videos—webtexts are now so ubiquitous throughout the Internet as to disappear in their very function. Almost every Web site invites user response through a variety of graphical features of the page, ranging from a Contact Us window, to a sidebar chat, to a commentary feed. While the data acquired from such annotations is often used to enhance user experience, it is also often used for product development or to create metrics for market analysis. This consumerist approach to Web page design leads to visually attractive and comfortable interfaces, but rarely do such pages accommodate divergent interests of their viewers, causing a slowing, if not a complete stoppage, of their rhetorical velocity, particularly if such recomposing is not oriented toward producing capital for the Web site’s stakeholders.

As we encourage our students to attend to the page as a unit of attention, then, we want also to prepare them to consider the interpretive, cultural, economic, and political implications of graphical user interface design, particularly when incorporating space for viewer response or content creation. To accomplish this, we believe it is important to provide opportunities for students to engage critically with a wide variety of annotation platforms in an effort to identify the underlying assumptions that determine the place of readerly writing on the page (Schacht; Nair). We ask students to respond to course readings using different varieties of digital annotation and then to reflect on their user experience, answering questions such as, How does the design of each page invite or resist certain types of annotation? How do the annotations contribute to the visual representation or production of meaning on the page? For the pur-
Pose of this essay, we will describe this pedagogical approach to one such platform: the commercially successful site *Genius* (genius.com).

Among the many annotation sites available, such as MIT’s *Annotation Studio* (www.annotationstudio.org) and the University of Virginia’s *Prism* (prism.scholarslab.org), perhaps the most visually stimulating is *Genius*, which began as the hip-hop commentary platform *Rap Genius* in 2009 and has recently expanded beyond rap and song lyrics to include a variety of annotatable objects, ranging from poetry to *Netflix* series’ scripts to album cover art. Students are particularly attracted to this site because of its seemingly endless interactivity, including its manicules for upvoting or downvoting suggested annotations; its competitive and multifaceted system of gaining annotative and editorial authority through the accumulation of “IQ”; and its audio and visual options, including music videos, sound files of poems, and color-coded text highlighting. Meera Nair has developed one pedagogical approach to the site, called “Annotation Exercises for Fiction Boot Camp,” which helps students create high-quality annotations focused on tracking literary elements, particularly characterization and theme (Schacht, pars. 36–38). Consider, for example, the *Genius* page devoted to Sylvia Plath’s regularly anthologized poem “Metaphors,” which contains the text of the poem in a column on the left side of page, as well as a slightly thinner column on the right dedicated to annotations for each line (fig. 7). Underneath the text of the poem is a row of social media icons, which allow the annotators to readily share the page to *Twitter* and *Facebook* or embed the page in their own Web sites. Annotations only appear when highlighted lines are clicked, which transforms the commentary into a digital palimpsest that can be peeled back to reveal annotations relevant to particular lines. Once a highlighted line is clicked, an annotation appears in the right-hand column, followed below by a list of “improvements” to the annotation, which are suggestions for revision to the existing annotation.

While students often emphasize how provocative and motivating *Genius* is, they also express frustration about its usability and its resistance to interpretive speculation. At first glance, creating annotations is simple: commentators highlight a word or passage and then type a comment in a text box. However, annotations that haven’t been verified by designated “editors” (users who have a high *Genius* IQ) are flagged in red, appear visually suspect, and may be eventually eliminated altogether. And in the case of short texts, such as “Metaphors,” and those that have
been extensively annotated, it is impossible to add a new annotation. Instead, users can merely suggest improvements to existing annotations, which require additional approval by other users before they can be incorporated into the annotation itself. Students notice that riskier interpretations often get coded as a “stretch” and are rarely added to existing annotations because the authorized comments are mostly descriptive or contextual in nature. The multivalence of a particular phrase, such as Plath’s “red fruit,” is not valued because the purpose of Genius annotation is not to accommodate multiple interpretations of particular lines but rather to create an authoritative commentary, much in the style of the Aesopus moralizatus, in which one moral per fable sufficed. This annotative authority is also visually represented on Genius pages in the placement of the suggested improvements below the approved annotation. If we examine the comments on “red fruit,” we find that the authoritative comment is focused on solving the riddle of the poem, which points to the red fruit as the flesh of the fetus being carried by the pregnant poetic persona. A four-year-old suggestion by a Genius user—a length of time that suggests it will never be incorporated into the annotation—offers an alternative reading to “red fruit” as referring to the forbidden fruit of Adam and Eve (fig. 7), an interpretation that addresses the frustrated tone of the speaker of the poem and the resentful description of pregnancy itself. Without these subtleties, Plath’s poem becomes merely a riddle to be decoded. While this kind of crowdsourced consensus clearly suits Wikipedia’s verifiable and factually based compilation of knowledge about the world, Genius’s creation of annotative authority through such a model reproduces the myth of the right reading of any text, a myth that is enabled through the strategic placement or effacement of readerly commentary. The result is a digital palimpsest that increasingly obscures the interpretive tensions beneath its surface, producing codified commentaries that declare interpretive authority through their visibility.

To encourage students to consider how the design of such pages influences the reception and interpretation of the writing they contain, we ask them to compare Genius to other social annotation sites, such as Annotation Studio and Prism. Students readily observe how easy it is to add comments to lines and passages in Annotation Studio, but they also find the annotation frame to be too crowded, making it difficult to distinguish between and respond to the comments of other annotators. While a variety of interpretations is valued on this site, the price of this textual
accumulation is occasionally unreadability, which undermines the purpose of social annotation altogether. On the other hand, a site like Prism offers color-coded forms of visual annotation, which limit the range of responses to a given text but also provide visualizations of interpretation, indicating through highlighted text and pie charts the percentage of readers who, for example, viewed particular words or lines in Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” as feminist or sexist. Asking students to create their own prisms on this site engages them with the ways in which the placement and restriction of particular modes of responding to the text within the page have significant interpretive implications. As Drucker suggests, “To imagine new intellectual forms of interpretation is also to design the spaces and supports that structure interpretive acts” (Graphesis 180). Students must then grapple with the ways in which graphical elements may both represent and produce interpretations, a prismatic dynamic dependent upon the careful placement of writing within a matrix of modes of meaning-making.

Attention to the history of the page and its contested status within digital environments should compel us, we believe, to evaluate the quality of page design on not only its capacity to accommodate multiple modes or to deliver content but also on its degree of modal intensity and complexity, which may invite or discourage readerly and writerly interactivity, circulation, and recomposition. Printed pages saturated with text, like many of our textbooks and student papers (and much of this essay and book), afford writing a high degree of modal intensity and represent meaning effectively, but often do little to encourage multimodal activity or critique. By contrast, the careful and limited intensity of fable text on the Aesopic manuscript page led to the accumulation of multiple interpretations of fables. This in turn led to the revision and recirculation of the fables themselves, even as it also challenged the limits of the printed page. In tracing the transformation of Pine Point Revisited to Welcome to Pine Point, the remediation of old media encourages users to recreate the audiovisual experience of reading a printed book, a reading event made possible by each user’s navigational choices. Even such innovative and interactive webtext designs, multimodally intense and complex though they are, risk the reproduction of certain print teleologies that value the visual and linear representation of knowledge over its production. For websites like Genius, which are highly dependent upon readerly contributions, it is imperative to consider, particularly in our teaching, the subtle
ways in which stimulating page designs use visual modes to privilege certain kinds of interpretations and limit the agency of future users. Central to this consideration, we conclude, is the nuanced place of writing on the page, its modal intensity, and its increasingly vexed status as a visual object of attention. Until we recognize the page as a space that can both visually represent and produce meaning, alphabetic writing will neither shed its monomodal reputation nor achieve its powerful potential within the multimodally complex world of digital composition.

Note

1. Though absent from Pine Point Revisited, Welcome to Pine Point pays explicit attention to the tremendous work of Cloutier, who, because of disability, composed his entire Web site through the process of voice input. The audio of his process often serves as the voiceover for Welcome to Pine Point.

Works Cited


Codex Claustroneoburgensis 1093. Circa mid-15th century, Stiftsbibliothek Klosterneuburg, Austria.


Figure 1. *Esopus moralizatus*, printed by Heinrich Quentell in Cologne in 1489. From the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, MS 99974.
Figure 2. The prologue to the mid-fifteenth-century elegiac Romulus, in larger script, surrounded by overwhelming commentary, in smaller script. From Codex Claustroneburgensis 1093, Stiftsbibliothek Klosterneuburg, fol. 350v–351r.
Figure 3. The home page of Pine Point Revisited
Figure 4. A screen capture from *Welcome to Pine Point*
Figure 5. Gallery of people from Pine Point in *Pine Point Revisited*
Figure 6. An interactive photo album page from *Welcome to Pine Point*.
Figure 7. The *Genius* page devoted to Sylvia Plath’s “Metaphors,” captured 27 Mar. 2019

Genius Annotation 4 contributors

Red suggests the flesh of the baby. Ivory suggests the bones, and the fine timbers suggest the growing limbs. Compare also the expression “fruit of her loins.”

Don’t read too much into ‘O’. It simply emphasizes the sense of exhibition referring to the baby.

Actually the red fruit is in reference to Adam and Eve (the sin of man made it so that women were forced to go through the pain of childbirth), the ivory references the chastity/purity that she has given up, and the fine timber is a metaphor for being crucified (essentially martyring herself by giving birth and having to devote the rest of her life to caring for/teaching her child). The “O” is in reference to old religious texts where many sentences meant to show suffering/loss/pain would start with O’ as a dramatic display of those emotions.