

# An Examination of the Rhetorics of Digital Scholarship and the Emerging Digital Monograph

Elli Mylonas ([elli\\_mylonas@brown.edu](mailto:elli_mylonas@brown.edu))

Brown University

A variety of rhetorics have been applied to digital compositions: the "rhetoric of hypermedia" (e.g. Landow), "rhetoric of multimedia" (e.g. Liestol), and "rhetoric of new media" (e.g. Chun, Manovich) are all terms that have been used. This work has often focused on the construction of a digital work at the level of nodes and links, more than on its narrative techniques. Landow's rhetoric of arrivals and departures, for instance, looks at the relationships between individual nodes, and their effect on one another via the rhetoric of the link. Bernstein, in his discussion of structural patterns in a hypertext also focuses on relatively smaller groups of nodes; while Bernstein's patterns are clearly intended to be composed into larger structures, or to provide components in the analysis of a larger structure, he does not elaborate how this composition or analysis works at the level of a whole work. Liestol and Fagerjord are more concerned with the narrative construction of digital publications. They are mainly studying the digital documentary, an expository medium which is similar in form and intent to scholarly hypertexts. Students of digital fiction have analyzed larger structures and discussed how meaning emerges from them (e.g. Walker), but there have not been many discussions of overall rhetorical structuring in scholarly web publications.

Projects or publications on the web with academic research subjects tend to fall into several discrete types. A partial list follows:

- Conventional linear monographs in digital form, differing from print monographs only in their medium of publication. These digital publications will not be discussed in this paper.
- A publication or dissemination of a primary source. Text-bases or archives are the main representatives of this class. They are intended for several levels of expertise, and readers can search through them on their own terms.
- A collection of primary and secondary sources meant to be explored by diverse audiences for more than one purpose. These sites have an encyclopedic, expository nature, and tend to surround primary source material with secondary sources.
- A collection of primary or secondary sources that explicitly represent a particular point of view, or publish a particular phase of research. These sites, with their combination of secondary and primary material are the prototypes of the *digital monograph*.
- A collaborative, annotatable, space that may only be accessible to a small group of authors. These sites are composed of collections of texts or other sources. They resemble laboratories, where research is on-going and benefits the participants more than the external reader.

Collaborative, emergent projects are not meant to read by third parties as much as by the participants. They are exploratory and communicative spaces for their participants, and as such, the rhetoric they exhibit is often one of annotation and conversation. Wikis provide a mode of publication that encourages organic growth and collaboration. *The Ivanhoe Game* also shares this modality, although it isn't a means of publication.

Although any collection or publication that has been consciously selected inherently reflects a bias and represents a particular point of view, some web-based projects are more explicit than others about their motivation and their purpose. Scholarly projects that have as their goal an edition or a collection of texts generally identify the guiding principles for their selections. Examples of such projects are text and image archives, like the WWP (<http://www.wwp.brown.edu>) and *The Empire that Was Russia* (<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/empire>)

When a scholar embarks on a project whose goal is to elucidate a particular topic through primary and secondary materials, biases become harder to tease out. Often, a project that originates as a research topic turns into a general expository publication whose goals are to collect and disseminate primary sources, and to contextualize them with secondary sources. Such a publication is inherently user-centered. However, because the intent of a researcher or student cannot be foreseen in advance by the creator of the publication, the project is often designed to allow multiple access and navigational modes, so that it can accommodate a wide variety of uses. The digital medium encourages this, and invites an author to attempt to provide many things to many people: syllabus, guided tour and resource collection, for example. Any authorial voice or point of view is overwhelmed by the encyclopedic omniscience and protean presentation of the publication.

Some publications avoid multi-linear, multi-access presentation even as they follow this recipe of primary sources surrounded by a matrix of contextualizing material. Instead, they impose a very rigid form, as in some instructional materials, where it is not possible to deviate from a prescribed path beyond a limited set of carefully scripted choices, if any. This can serve to hide bias or point of view, by making it harder to question or challenge the publication.

Finally, there are digital publications that resemble the print monograph in that they prioritize a set of research results and have an identifiable authorial voice. Primary source materials coexist with authored text, but they are juxtaposed in support of the argument that is being made. Like the publications described above, these publications may also allow a reader multiple navigational strategies, but they privilege a single narrative thread. The interface and navigational structure are designed to reflect the argument, and the principles used in selecting primary source materials are clear. Readers familiar with the site or its material may only want to consult some primary sources, so it is possible to navigate directly to identifiable nodes, but this kind of navigation is clearly secondary. One of the best-known web based monographs is Thomas and Ayers, 2003. One of the earliest is Kolb, 1994.

The authored, digital monograph allows a scholar to do things that are difficult in a print publication. It is possible, for example, to present a coherent argument while weaving several different threads and approaches to a problem; it is also possible to include supplementary material that would require a distracting digression in a traditional publication. Conventional articles are constrained by length limits and by the rhetoric of the page to making one point. A digital monograph allows an author with single argument to present multiple threads of argumentation and discussion which will augment one another, but which are not necessarily interdependent.

This paper will use examples from projects the author has participated in, as well as others to discuss emerging features of the digital monograph, and to compare them with other types of scholarly, digital publication. It will look at interface and interaction design, as well as at the information design underlying the publication.

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