Interactivity

Reconceiving the audience in the struggle for textual 'control' of narrative and distribution

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the ways in which recent theorisations of interactivity work to reconceive the author-text-audience relationship. Suggesting that all media forms—historical and contemporary—can be reconceptualised in light of recent understandings of interactivity, I argue that control over the text and its narrative as mythically 'finished' products is struggled over between an authorial desire for finality and an audience desire for control over the arrangement, (re)configuration, and (re)distribution of the text. This struggle takes place across the sites of technological developments of textual control versus full interactivity, and in the realms of both media theory and media law.*

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Introduction

The advent of interactive new media and new media theory is not merely an opportunity to consider the ways in which authorship and audience alter in line with the cultural emergences of new technologies of communications, but a valuable opportunity to revisit the very meanings of both authorship and audience. I argue here that in the light of both new developments in interactivity with the text as found in the increasing popularity of new media forms such as multimedia, electronic gaming, and the mp3, and the 'backlash' development of new technologies, softwares, and legal methods that actively seek to prevent

alteration and redistribution of texts, the historical and contemporary conception of the author-text-audience affinity can be characterised as a tactical contention for control over the text. I contend that this is a struggle set across a number of different contexts, media forms, sites, and author/audience capacities. Dery's important work, *Culture Jamming*, describes the tactics of a new grassroots resistance to textual control, simplification, and the power of an information industry that manufactures consent through the maintenance of control over textual interpretation. For Dery, this resistance takes the form of media hacking, informational warfare, terror-art, and the guerilla semiotics of work that sought to point out the significatory foundations of existing mass media texts (Dery, 1993). This conception of an emerging, diametric war between media creators/industries and audience participation and interpretation is something I want to consider here in light of both the past history of the audience in its *longue durée,* and the ways in which emerging forms of interactivity that empowers audiences over text and narrative—as found in both lip-service gestures to interactive television and new digital media formats such as the macromedia flash file—extend Dery's forms of audience resistance by putting the very author-text-audience relationship of textual control in question.

The rise of interactivity as a style or form of audience participation is by no means the latest trend in media history, nor something that disrupts a prior synergy between author-text-audience, but a strongly held and culturally based desire to participate in the creation and transformation of the text that has effectively been denied by previous technologies of media production and distribution. Interactivity has fast become a buzz-term of consumer sales and digital media celebration, and its definition is both broad and problematic (Kiousis, 2002, p. 357). The sort of interactivity I am interested in here is that which McMillan defines as 'registrational'. As McMillan puts it, this form of interactivity is 'a measure of a medium's potential to register information from, and thereby also adapt and/or respond to, a given user's explicit choice of communication method' (McMillan, 2002, p. 274). This view of interactivity, which McMillan also refers to as 'responsive dialogue' (McMillan, 2002, p. 277), is about sequences of messages occurring in a two-way communication process, whereby messages are seen to come from both content-creator—perhaps in a time-lapsed system—or the communications method itself, and from the user as responses, inputs, commands, or various other forms of utilisation that alter the mode, style, type, form, or, indeed, the content itself. As Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) put it:

> *interactivity is not a characteristic of the medium. It is a process-related construct about communication. It is the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages.*

This is the sort of interactivity with the text that is *either* built in as a feature of the text, as we find in electronic gaming as dependent on user inputs for play, *or* that which is clearly not intended by the author-creator or distributor, but which through digital technologies allows a user to otherwise transform, reconfigure, alter, or redistribute a text. What interactivity as a motif or variation of reception does for the concept of the text is further put into question the idea that it is an easily discernible 'thing' with form; it reinforces the point made by Williams (1990), and many others, that the media text can and should be thought through other concepts such as flow and process. The point to be made here is that this form of interactive engagement is the culmination of a much older and ongoing contestation over control of a text *as if* a text were a finished, unified, and coherent whole at the time at which it has been disseminated. In this paper, I want to address the issue of 'struggle' between author-creator and audience-user in the context of digital interactive forms, looking only briefly at three nodal points in the argument: the history of the author/audience relationship, the possibilities for (unauthorised) distribution of texts such as mp3s, and the practice of coding and decoding flash multimedia texts.

The author-audience struggle: Interactive desires and the backlash of control

In a recent televised advertisement for CNN.com, it was pointed out that 'the average computer has 101 keys'. It goes on: 'We say, you only need three—CNN'. Although making a play between the physical interface device for standard internet access and the brand name, it is demonstrably representative of the ways in which interactivity is both enabled and stemmed in popular discourses around new media, authorship, texts, and audiences. The keyboard, the extension of the traditional typewriter with all the creative connotations that go with it, is the interface device of content-creation *par excellence*. The implication of CNN's reduction to needing only three keys is that news and information creation is, and should be, in the hands of a media industry and its 'legitimated' authors, journalists, or content-creators. Mass news media, which on the one hand purport to represent 'the

people' (as the mass, the reader, the audience) are, of course, not quite as independent from capital or state (Hardt & Negri, 2000, pp. 311–312), and do indeed stand to lose the network power of 'voice' and the gatekeeping power of 'making discourse (un)available' the greater the interactivity over text that is granted to an audience. The struggle between author and audience, characterised as a struggle between corporate media industries and consumer-users, is well illustrated in the juxtaposition of CNN's advertisement against independent internet media, such as indymedia.com, which in both structural terms and intent allows content-creation, right of reply and redefinition, debate, and discussion to be held by the general user—indeed, its founding motto was 'Everyone's a journalist'.

The very idea of the author as the central authority of a work is, as Foucault pointed out, one that is regulated within culture (1977, p. 123). Recent questions over, for example, intellectual property illustrate the nexus in which authorship is located within issues of protections that accord a text's 'ownership' with an assertion of 'rights' not to have that work altered or distributed outside of an author's or industry owner's oversight and control. The Internet, as an example of new media, could be considered the site at which the author's name disappears as a plethora of anonymous sites, commentaries, knowledges, and textualities emerge amidst an environment predicated on its interactivity and exchangeability, although in the sometimes push towards a recorporatisation of the Internet as it functions as a public sphere, the role of the author and the emphasis on author verification are restored in the tide towards recentralisation of the medium (Dahlberg, 2001; Ess, 1994; Papacharissi, 2002). The continuation of the mythos of the author into the digital age is one that is now to be located in what Castells refers to as a pluralisation of sources of authority (1997, p. 303)—which includes the audience exercising consumer choice, in the weakest form of interactive feedback, and, in the strongest, a full interactive engagement with the text, permitting its imaginative manipulation, reconfiguration, transformation, and redistribution.

What occurs once interactivity is deemed to make available an aspect of participation within text-creation or the ability to alter, transform, or re-distribute a text has been considered on the one hand to be the *empowerment* of audience (McMillan, 2002, pp. 279, 285), and on the other to be the dissolution of the traditional concept of audiencehood (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003, p. 333; Webster, 1998, p.190). Definitions of audience are of course diverse and contested, but, by necessity,

have been subject to various forms of categorisation, particularly where such categorisations occur in ways that give the power of the audience to interpret, act, transform, or redistribute different valencies. In her salient work, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (1991), Ang, for example, categorises the audience across two paradigms: on the one hand, a *public*, and on the other, a *market*. Ang's distinction is also of significance in demonstrating the gap between the audience desire for participation, and the authorial desire for textual control (1991, p. 29). It continues to be the case that the greater part of communication research is commercial in nature and attempts to measure audiences rather than study the processes through which audiences engage with a text (Bogart, 1996, p. 138). Certainly, it is not a wild claim to suggest that it benefits a corporate media industry to think of audiences as 'mass', a continuation into the age of interactivity of an industrial production model (modernist) over a consumption, niche, or active model (postmodern) to put the distinction in Jameson's terms (1985).

However, Ang's dualist system is open to reinterpretation in terms of the rise of various forms of interactive engagement: for Ang, the audience-as-public paradigm locates the audience in a transmission model of communication, viewing the audience as that which requests and, under paternalistic systems, requires information and meaning. This view of the audience is of a mass group of 'receivers' within a system of more-or-less ordered transference of meaning (Ang, 1991, p. 29). The desire for interactive engagement and participation under such a view would be seen to be a disruption of this order of transference, and would dissolve the centrist model on which transmissional systems are based. We might view the interactive audience—where such interactivity involves participation in the transformation or co-creation of the text—as a new category to describe both an ancient form and its re-emergence alongside digital media technologies. In his *Communication as Culture* (1988), Carey identifies two views of communication practices from a culturalist perspective, taking into account the role of the audience—the transmission view and the ritual view. The transmission view is the standard, pedestrian account of communication as it occurs in line with, say, Shannon's SMR communication model, and is defined by key terms such as 'imparting', 'sending', 'transmitting', and 'giving information to others'. Messages are transmitted and distributed across space for the control of distance and of people (1988, p. 14). The ritual view, on the other hand, likens communication to acts of 'sharing', 'association', 'fellowship', 'possession of a common faith'. Carey suggests that it is more ancient than the concept of transmission, and is not

directed towards the extension of messages in space, but towards the maintenance of society across time (1988, p. 18). Although neither of these perspectives on the role of the audience (as receiver, as fellowship) entirely precludes interactivity, it remains that the transmission model is lodged in a sense of the *primacy of authorship*, and the ritual understanding model in *communication as participatory*, but ultimately for the organisation and management of the people *around* a set of authored texts—a view not different from a Foucauldian governmentality approach. It is my suggestion here that the *audience as interactive* constitutes a third position, one that is dominant but has been obscured by the 20th century prevalence of recordable media. It is this third position or view that works to blur the distinction between author, text, and audience by suggesting that such a distinction is a false one that, by cultural signification or by technological availability, has attempted to shore up the idea of the author as one of *authority* over the text and has simultaneously attempted to assert the unity, coherence, and completion of the text. The interactive position is one that is located in the push-and-pull struggle between author-industry and audience-user over the right and ability to access and utilise the text in ways more than just scavenging through interpretation and the readings of alternative or marginal meanings.

Certainly audience members and those who would ordinarily be defined by media industries as content-receivers or content-users are aware of the push-and-pull relationship between narrative control and audience interactivity. In interviews with users of the Internet and interactive media, Downes and McMillan (2000) found responses categorisable across the three areas of the revolutionary potential of interactivity, the general consequences to media consumption, and an uncertainty over the future of media use. As one respondent put it: 'I have a voice now. I think the threat is to existing institutions and the old ways of doing things' (Downes & McMillan, 2000, p. 164). As with many of their other responses, a clear articulation of a dyad between author-creator and audience-user over control of the text is expressed, and it is through interactivity that such a struggle occurs in the more recent emergence of an interactive audience.

It would not be too great a risk to suggest that the contemporary, late-20th century form of live, real-time theatre is one that in its dominant, middle-class mode returns to an even earlier form in the presentation of the sacred, in which any attempt to interfere or involve oneself by the audience is to cross a line, seats-to-stage, the penetration of the sacred space that, to use Kristeva's (1982) term, would be an act of

abjection. To speak during a play is not merely to disrupt the audience and actors, but to disrupt the theatrical work as a *finished* work, put it into question, destabilise the finality and exact reproducibility of the play. Thus, where the very architectural aesthetics of the Greek amphitheatre that sponsors interactive engagement with the play as text is contrasted against the Victorian stage, it is possible to see how a much older form of interactive participation and co-creation has been sidelined in the subsequent history or imagination of the role of the audience. Under the restrictive model, cinema is thus viewed as the theatre performance *par excellence*, because it is restricted by a screen operating as an impenetrable seam and by the lapse in time that halts any possibility of destabilisation of the text as a 'finished' text.

The basis on which we traditionally differentiate the theatre as a communication text from the scripted or printed book, the cinema, the television, the radio, and the html Internet website is that, for the greater part, the latter make available a text that is recorded as opposed to disseminated in 'real time' or, if it is to be in real time such as the television 'live coverage' news, for example, it is distributed through a one-way, non-interactive system, and thereby not available for interruption, interference, or transformation in any form. Even in the case of a live, real-time event, the audience is disempowered from a creative and transformative role by the simple fact of distance: broadcast mass media, as Meadows suggests, effectively separates media program-makers and audiences (Meadows, 1994, p. 133). Various developments do, of course, allow greater user control, and we can figure the development and the utilisation of these as an incremental step in a struggle for the democratisation of control over the text—the pull from the audience. In the case of television, the advent of the video recorder not only released the text from the broadcast imperatives of time, but allowed a user to watch at various speeds, forward through segments of little interest, re-watch the entire text a second or third time and, for the more advanced, utilise two video recorders to reorder sequences or sections of the text (Jenkins, 1992, p. 212; Penley, 1997, p. 114), thereby allowing an early form of registrational interactivity that provided control over the text and the narrative.

There is nothing new in this point, other than to suggest that should we look for causal factors in the rise and popularity of (registrational) interactive entertainment; it would always be wise to avoid a technological determinist approach and to view this emergence as one activated from within culture and cultural arrangements that have a

history stretching back across the longer period of communications. As Williams attests, understanding media technologies depends on seeing them as located within culture and within an interpretation of their development that restores *intention* to the process of development:

> *The technology would be seen, that is to say, as being looked for and developed with certain purposes and practices already in mind... [T]hese purposes and practices would be seen as direct: as known social needs, purposes and practices to which the technology is not marginal but central. (1990, p. 13)*

With this point in mind, it would thereby be possible to suggest that one way in which we can view the historical development of various media technologies is from a perspective that understands their emergence as driven by a cultural—that is, popular—demand for interactive engagement and a democratisation of control over the text. This is a demand to take it out of the hands of authors, to allow not only the recording and re-recording of the text and some ability to distribute it independently, but to re-sequence the text, re-order it, change its quality, all in accord with the imaginative requirements and gratifications of the audience-user. It is, of course, digital technologies that are then to be understood as the culmination of this cultural desire, in that they allow the greatest ease of textual manipulation, copying, and distribution across a network. What such technologies do is effectively restore to the audience their capacity to participate in the same ways in which a contemporary culture views ancient Greek theatre and communicative forms as being driven by active and creative participation over transmission. As interactive engagement and participation become increasingly popular features of audience desire and behaviour, textual coherence is further interrogated, such that we witness questions over the textuality of, say, electronic games, whereby there remains a pointed and possibly fruitful indecidability between the game as *text* or *play* (Berger, 2002, p. 11–12; Pearce, 2002). I would argue that, even as the text becomes more amorphous, the 'location' of the text becomes increasingly difficult to place, particularly when it is digital and networked, rather than carrying the 'aura' of the physical and the individual (Benjamin, 1992).

Digitisation, Napster, and the user's participation in (re)distribution

Perhaps the site at which the interactive struggle for control over the text occurs at its most visible is around questions of distribution of digital forms of media, and particularly the distribution of music through such

decentralised 'nodes' as peer-to-peer (P2P) networking, as found in the facilities provided variously by Napster, Gnutella, and WinMX. As Jones cogently puts it, technologies associated with the distribution of music over the Internet are techologies both of *geography* and of *audiences* (2002, p. 214). The shift of music production and reproduction into digital, changeable, malleable formats such as CD and, more particularly, mp3 has allowed audience-users to wrest control of distribution from the author-creator or the authorised agents, industries, and existing industrial distribution networks that have argued for legal controls over importing, exporting, parallel distributions, and other arrangements that seek to benefit corporate bodies and industries. Indeed, the phenomenon of the mp3 disturbs the industries not because it brings about arguments over copyright and distribution arrangements, for these have dominated the industries for several decades amidst the reconfiguration of distribution in processes of globalisation. Rather, it is because it has introduced those formerly labelled or targeted as consumers, audiences, and users to enter into both the discourses around copyright and distribution, and the physical, actual methods of redistribution.

Again, the copying and redistribution of music tracks is not an altogether new phenomenon: the audio cassette was easily amenable to copying, dubbing, reorganisation, and redistribution. Although copyright laws sought to prevent this user-control over the 'final' destination of the musical text, the method of copying was crude—the quality poorer with each generation of dubbing—the distribution method physical. However, locating music texts now in a network that emerges from and within the cultural desires for networked convergence and textual malleability draws control over recorded music away from the traditional distribution networks and into new ones in which audience members have much greater capacity—perhaps the greatest, in fact—to utilise technology for dominion over the distribution of a text. The struggle is indicated with two levels of responses: firstly, the various legal battles around Napster and subsequent judicial cases, legislative measures, and physical or juridical systems of policing the distribution of mp3s, and, secondly, through the continuing development of new, preventative technologies and softwares that halt the ability of users to take textual distribution into their own hands.

Likewise, the capacity for mp3 malleability permits the reconfiguration of the text itself—a spate of remixes, re-recordings, additions, and amateur music videos is made possible by the digital format of recorded music, whereby audiences have both the capacity and the

imagination to 'play' with the text in a way that has never before been possible, or has been possible only in the most makeshift of ways. The professionalisation of the amateur audience member and the desire to participate in reconfiguration of the text suggests that no recorded music ever achieves a full, final textuality, but is rather viewed as that which is always open to reconfiguration along with redistribution.

Swiffering around the new media text

The push-and-pull relationship between content creators and interactive audiences is also witnessed in a slightly different realm in the creation of new digital media, and in a range of products, programs, sites, and texts. Admittedly, there are many everyday, practical purposes for an author to maintain a certain form of control over the text produced. In my own teaching, for example, I tend to make available notes and summaries in an electronic capacity. In order to prevent students from cutting and pasting material back into their assessed work, and to avoid having notes altered—perhaps misrepresenting other authors—and redistributed, I would ordinarily dump that material into an Acrobat .pdf document, with the view that fewer students would have access to a full-capacity Acrobat program to unlock the text from the file (this is probably a naïve position, underestimating the capacities of others to find ways around such attempts to lock down the text). This is about control, and it is about the ways in which new digital forms of distribution have allowed an ease to alter and utilise a document, to interactively engage with the text, such that practical forms of control are occasionally warranted. The ethics of doing so are, nevertheless, quite complex, and I could not say that I am necessarily comfortable at all times with my own attempts to control not only the re-distribution, but the content of a document. This does, however, illustrate the ways in which the push-and-pull of author versus (intended) audience control over the text is heightened dramatically in a digital environment.

An interesting example is seen in the recent shift of much Internet content production from hypertext mark-up language formats to the more professional production of .swf files through programs like Macromedia Flash and Flash MX. Although this is part of an overall and continuing professionalisation among the general user demographic who are fast picking up the creative tools used initially in digital industry environments, it has also been about shutting down the accessibility of content, preventing content alteration—including that received by an end-user with only one of several hundred thousand digital copies on a home computer—and stopping individual parts of a textual product, such as photographs or sections of text, being copied, individualised, cut-and-pasted into other texts, or stored individually and independently of the rest of the content. In the completion of a macromedia flash text in its conversion from an .fla file to an .swf file, the possibilities for an audience-user or recipient to engage interactively in active reconfiguration, transformation, and utilisation of the text are shut down (Probets, n.d.). By locking down the code, an in-built feature of the Macromedia Flash development program, the author-producer is able to maintain control over the text and its narrative, no matter how hypertextual that narrative might prove to be. Indeed, any interactivity built into the text will be choice-based and via the options presented by the author-producer. This is the push.

The pull from the audience in the continuing desire to have participation and interactivity—that is, the capacity to change, alter, or utilise a document on one's own terms—comes in the form of the development of what are sometimes collectively known as either swifty or swiffer programs (named after the file extension .swf). One such swiffer program is defined as follows:

> *Swiffer is a surprisingly useful MSDOS routine that easily creates an HTML file for any SWF document and automatically puts both it and the new HTML file in the Active Sync 'My Documents' folder. All you do is drop the SWF file on the desktop Swiffer icon, give the HTML a name when prompted, sync, then use Pocket File Explore to find the HTML file and then execute it. (http://members.cox.net/nnsydev/#FlashBrowser)*

Other, similar amateur programs are able to remove protection tags from an .swf file, unlock the code to be edited, reconfigured, or utilised otherwise, and a Swiff Extractor program allows the extraction of JPEG files from the previously protected .swf format. The development of tools by which to regain a certain level of control over an authored, distributed text, to copy aspects, to re-arrange, are all part of the pull from the audience in the struggle for textual and narrative control.

Clearly the push-back response from the media and computing industries is the development of ever more complex forms of control, one recent example being the Microsoft plans for 2002 Windows.NET server technologies with incorporated Digital Rights Management (DRM) programming, giving media conglomerates complete control over the ways in which their content is viewed by consumers. As Cochrane (2002) puts it, 'Microsoft has unveiled its vision for the future digital media landscape and it's a world where content creators

are king'. Part of the process of developing new DRM programming is to force the makers of media players to ensure their software isn't used to view suspect media streams—a process not dissimilar from the DVD-Copy Control Association that is used by Hollywood for dealing with DVD makers. The addition here is to use networking to request a licence key from a copyright clearing house, which will be re-issued each time a player begins a particular track, file, or document. As Cochrane (2002) puts it:

> *It enables finely tuned licensing terms and conditions, such as limited 24-hour play, a set number of plays over a given time, or an outright purchase licence that lets the viewer watch the video or listen to music whenever they want. It will also be used to bind content to a specific PC, so that it cannot be redistributed around a house or played on a different device... The idea is 'to keep honest users honest'... by greatly restricting the ability of consumers to dictate how the media they consume is used.*

The rhetoric here makes clear the ways in which a particular form of struggle between author-audience or creator-consumer is ongoing in the research, planning, and development stages of new technological evolution and growth. The critical response has been to articulate a fear over the abolition of consumer rights to such forms as timeshifted video recording and 'fair use' for the purposes of education and criticism.

None of this is to suggest that the push-back response is limited only to those with an investment in control of some idea of textual purity. Rather, the response is located more diversely. The indymedia sites that originate through the framework of accessibility to journalistic production have themselves developed charters and means of controlling, deciphering, and gate-keeping information that appears on their sites, often for the reason of limiting the site to that which is 'newsworthy' and reducing the levels of contention and controversy. Considered public debate on the question of this push-and-pull between the author function and the audience desire for co-creative interactivity and participation is yet to occur, although an interesting case in which a public outcry at a form of interactivity that utilised networking and convergence occurred recently in New Zealand. The New Zealand Symphony Orchestra released in 2002 a promotional CD, sent out by physical mail to 8,000 people as part of its marketing for its 2003 season. As a result of the interactive potential of listeners to use a networked program such as MusicMatch Jukebox or RealOne Player to 'name' tracks on a CD that are subsequently archived in a CD database—an option for a small gesture of co-creative participation—other users found that the CD tracks had been given the names of explicit sex acts. Rather than being treated as a mere prank or very minor misbehaviour, New Zealand police became involved in investigating how this occurred with a search for the source ('From Music to Porn', 2002). The small public outcry in this amusing case illustrates, perhaps most strongly of all, the lack of preparedness for genuine user co-creative potential through digital mediums.

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