

Limbs beyond the skin: Exploring the physical realities of digital composition

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses how prolonged participation and digital composition online intersect to forge material extensions of the physical body, or limbs beyond the skin. Based on postmodern theories of technology and the body, I argue that these limbs, while less tangible, merit serious consideration given their potential to engender physical reactions to virtual events. The data used to illustrate this forging of limbs comes from a study of student engagement with online role-play, in which fictional role-play events had physical consequences for real-world participants. Exploring the body as networked across online and offline contexts provides a deeper understanding not only of youth engagement in the process of digital media composition but also in the design of curriculum that involves virtual settings for learning.

KEYWORDS: *Digital composition, networked bodies, online identity, online role-play, virtual personas.*

Interviewer: Can you think of a moment in the [online role-play] debate that you felt powerless, your lowest moment in the debate?

Joel: That was definitely when I found out that I had killed another person. ... I wake up and I go online and someone has just commented on the blog. I open it up and read, "Mike Vacanti Killed My Sister." I'm like, I didn't even think that we could do this, that this was legal in blog. I had no answer for that, so I went to class and I was like, I don't even want to go to class anymore.

Interviewer: Yet it was that same event that empowered you to think about how you could also change the rules of the debate [by adding your own fictional event]

Joel: Yeah, but I was weakened for a couple days. I didn't even log onto the blog for a couple days, because I didn't even know what to do.

When talking with Joel¹ about his experience participating in an online role-play, he is quick to mention how physically affected he was by the actions of the other role-play participants. In this particular case, the role-play activity was not part of Joel's late night gaming online, but rather was a required assignment for Joel's first-year writing course. The seven-week role-play unit asked that students create fictional roles to discuss and debate whether or not the drinking age should be lowered to 18. The moment of "weakness" Joel describes above occurred when his fictional, role-play character, "Mike Vacanti", was accused of killing another character in a car accident while driving drunk. Joel goes on to describe this fictional event as not only "weakening" his stance within the online role-play debate, but also as giving him a stomach ache and diminishing his motivation to attend the face-to-face portion of class.

For Joel, the fictional writing event had physical consequences for his real-world body and actions. While the physical consequences may have been limited to a

¹ Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of participants.

stomach ache and decreased enthusiasm, for others, the material realities of online interactions are much more serious. Take for instance the frequent occurrence of virtual rape in Second Life where real-world bodies have sought counseling for violations against their avatar bodies (Lynn, 2007). Moreover, we must consider the rise in cyber bullying as it occurs online in ways that span across school and home contexts (Shah, 2011), as illustrated in the tragic death of Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers student, who took his own life after others posted videos on YouTube of his intimate affairs (Teicher Khadaroo, 2010). Whether the interactions occur in online realms such as Second Life, YouTube, Facebook, or class management systems such as Moodle, online communications have physical consequences for real bodies, even in the most innocent of curricular tasks.

In the case of Joel, the curricular task was to develop a fictional identity in order to research, discuss and debate an issue through online role-play. The instructional purpose of the online interaction was to promote perspective-taking and audience identification in persuasive writing, two documented benefits of using online role-play in writing instruction (Beach & Doerr-Stevens, 2009; Laurinen & Marttunen, 2007). The online role-play unit, which took place over the course of seven weeks (see Table 1), was graded only on participation and not on whether one “won” or “lost” the debate. Instead the role-play was meant to be a fictional application of the persuasive writing concepts being discussed in the face-to-face portion of class. That said, the overlapping of these fictional and real-world contexts raises important questions about the body as a fully engaged organism in the processes of writing and participation online. Of particular interest are the boundaries of virtual and real-world bodies, and how these bodies and their related identities become entangled through writing curriculums that involve participation online and off.

Week 1	Students choose debate topics and select roles for online personas.
Week 2	Students post biography entries and research topic from persona point of view.
Weeks 3-5	Students debate issue from persona point of view.
Week 5	Senator roles vote on the issue.
Weeks 6-7	Students write a rhetorical analysis of role-play experience, answering the question “Who had persuasive power and why?”

Table 1. Online role-play agenda (7 weeks total)

To examine these questions, this article will first describe an analytical framework for re-imagining the body as networked across contexts. Next, the notion of a networked body, including its digital limbs and entanglements will be illustrated through a close analysis of the online role-play postings of Krista and Joel, who engage in an online struggle over embodiment and ownership. To close, I will explore how the notion of networked body provides a deeper understanding of the embodied engagement of participation and digital composition online.

EMBODIED IDENTITIES

Just as identity has long been seen as an analytical tool for examining literacy and its related social practices (cf Gee, 1990; Lewis & del Valle, 2008), so too has the body

proved a potent concept for examining the social construction of identity learned and performed (cf Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Haraway, 1991). That said, the interest in the body and the materiality of its movements has shifted as the landscape of literacy expands into online practices within virtual realms. While many literacy scholars continue to research identity as it occurs online, few attempt to unpack the body as a fully present participant online.

One scholar in particular, Thomas (2004; 2007a), claims that online participation in Second Life and various other new media spaces, creates a new type of body, material “cyberbodies” that are “self-produced through words and images within social and discursive practices” (2004, p. 359) and that ultimately we are “writing the body” and ourselves into existence (p. 359). In later work, Thomas (2007b; 2008) continues to explore this building of the body online, urging that we consider the practices of consuming and producing online bodies as a new literacy practice in itself. While Thomas’ work opens up understandings of embodiment online through her explicit attention to the body as a vehicle for online participation, the question remains as to how these online bodies interact, and perhaps overlap with various objects and bodies offline as well. To address the body as an organism that reaches across contexts, a re-imagining of the body is needed, one that both illustrates the presence of networking limbs and explains how these limbs expand capacities to sense, interpret and communicate meaning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE NETWORKING OF LIMBS

In terms of networked extensions of the body, I draw on the work of Katherine Hayles (2005), whose discussion of *embodied textuality*, supports the possibility of limbs that extend beyond the skin. Like Thomas (2004), Hayles claims that electronic texts are not dematerialised entities, but rather become embodied texts, through mobilising different semiotic resources in ways that make meaning accessible. As Hayles explains, “what matters ... is how the text creates possibilities for meaning by mobilising certain aspects of its physicality.” (p. 103). In other words, when working with various modes of expression online such as sound, image, interaction and words, new structures of meaning and knowing are formed, which establish not only digital but physical connections with those involved.

Hayles extends the concept of embodied textuality with her notion of *Work as Assemblage (WaA)*, which she defines as “a cluster of related texts that quote, comment upon, amplify, and otherwise intermediate one another” (p. 105). To illustrate the “clustering” of this assemblage, Hayles offers a close reading of the electronic text *Patchwork Girl*, written by Shelley Jackson. In this online, interactive text the bride of Frankenstein has been resurrected and seeks to understand her fragmented existence. Like Frankenstein’s creation, her body is composed of various body parts sewn together, each part with its own story. Visually, the online text is displayed across the screen in the form of a fragmented body, each piece housing its own story, to be revealed at the click of the mouse.

The protagonist of *Patchwork Girl*, a seamstress, is described as continuously sewing together the pieces of the bride’s body. In so doing there is much focus on the bride’s scars and stitches, which serve to connect the body’s pieces. The seamstress’ stitching

is often paralleled with writing, as the following excerpt illustrates, “I had made her [the bride], writing deep into the night by candlelight until the tiny black letters blurred into stitches and I began to feel that I was sewing a great quilt” (quoted in Hayles, 2005, p. 154). This stitching/sewing/writing is presented as an existential process of making meaning, in which the multiple stories inside the bride’s body are read as a collective patchwork.

In many ways the stitching together of the patchwork body echoes Thomas’ (2004) description of “writing the body” into existence. However, it differs significantly in that the patchwork body is sewn together via the attention and care of the seamstress. This focus on the diligent work of the seamstress heightens the continuous engagement of a writer, or offline participant, who is deeply invested in the process of making meaning through connecting the disparate pieces. In this sense, writers and media users in general become materially connected to the texts or patchwork bodies they create. Similar to the work of Cranny-Francis, who explores the notion of wearable technologies such as cell phones as enhancements or augmentations of the body, the texts we create also become extensions of our being (Cranny-Francis, 2008). Whether online or off, these multiple texts serve as embodiments, or limbs that extend beyond the skin, networking the body across contexts and space.

DIGITAL LIMBS AS SENSUOUS

To further flesh out the workings of these digital limbs, including how they are able to experience physical sensation, I draw on the work of educational philosopher Marjorie O’Loughlin (2006), whose notion of *creatural existence* explains the role of collaborative activity and sensation in the building of networked bodies. O’Loughlin, like Hayles, presents the body as networked and distributed, but also as a complex ecology, inseparable from its surroundings. As O’Loughlin describes,

So the sensitive body, deeply in communion with its environment, is not a body over which mind has control. In other words, it is not that body which educational theorising has assumed – a separate entity in a world of material objects – but rather is of the very same stuff of its environs, living and non-living bodies. As such it is never fixed but rather emerges again and again out of a constantly changing web of relations to an environment of things, people, projects, and demands (p. 75)

This ecological model of subjectivity presents the body not only as a clustering of entities but also as a multisensorial network, that collaborates seamlessly with the various objects and texts of its surroundings. These systemic collaborations between bodies, technologies and texts expand the body’s capacity for sensation and knowing beyond that of the traditional senses of vision, aural, touch, taste, and so on. (p. 66-67). As O’Loughlin further describes,

It is the body (not simply a guiding consciousness) that understands its world, and it is the body which holds within it those intentional threads that run outward to the world: the body’s grasping of the world is like a set of invisible but intelligent threads streaming out between body and the specific world with which each body is familiar. (p. 81)

In other words, it is the body's multisensorial network, composed of the various "intelligent threads" or collaborations with technology tools and texts that understands the world, not the consciousness. These invisible yet intelligent threads amass into sensate limbs.

At last we arrive at a networked understanding of the body, which like the bride of Frankenstein in *The Patchwork Girl*, is stitched together via various "invisible but intelligent threads". In combining the theoretical work of Hayles (2005) and O'Loughlin (2006), we re-imagine the body as a networking of limbs that extends beyond the skin. As suggested by Hayles, these limbs are forged through material interactions between the physical and the semiotic for the purposes of making meaning. In addition to extending outward from the skin, these collaborations allow for a multisensorial network of sensation and knowing. Repeated and ritualised, these patterns of collaboration become the crux of making meaning and the central practice of body-building across contexts. In breaking down these practices of body-building, we can better understand Joel's experience in the role-play event.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: KRISTA AND JOEL AS ENTANGLED BODIES

To further illustrate the body as a networking of collaborations online and off, I now turn to the postings of two online, role-play participants: Krista and Joel. I choose these two participants because of their explicit blurring of identities online and off. Guiding my analysis of Krista and Joel's blog postings are the following questions:

1. How do Krista and Joel collaborate with the resources of online setting to forge embodied textuality and ultimately a networked body?
2. How and when is this process of networked embodiment interrupted? In other words, how do networked bodies create and/or sense contested limbs?

Background to the study

The data for this illustration comes from a case study conducted in 2006-2007, a time when college curriculum was just beginning to implement tools for digital writing. The study focused on students' use of online writing tools within a first-year composition course at a large Midwestern University. For the role-play, students generated issues for debate and multiple personas positioned differently within the debates. Over a period of four weeks, students invented a character, posted a biography for their character, and then wrote "memos" to each other from their chosen characters' perspectives. Data collection involved survey feedback, several blog postings (comments and entries), and follow-up interviews with focal students. The postings below, written by Krista and Joel, were part of a debate discussing whether the drinking age should be lowered from 21 to 18. To begin the examination of Krista and Joel's postings, I start with the fictional biographies that each posted for their role-play characters: The Parent and Mike Vacanti.

The Parent

Hello everyone! My name is Krista and I am the parent of a 19-year-old daughter named Megan. Megan is a freshman at the U of M and started to drink in high school. I was unaware of her drinking until her senior year when she came and told me that either she was going to the party and driving home intoxicated or she'd spend the night. I of course told her to spend the night but was always worried that she'd do something she'd regret; maybe even get pregnant. Alcohol just has this way of interfering with good thinking that it's normal for me to be a concerned parent. When I was growing up the drinking age was 18. However, when my friends and I went out we wouldn't worry whether one of us would end up in the ER having our stomachs pumped or if we were going to crash into a car on the road. For some reason, throughout these past 10-15 years drinking has gone to the extreme. Kids don't realise the dangers of drinking until it's too late. The binge drinking that is killing kids is outrageous but there's nothing we can really do to stop it. I think that if the drinking age would be lowered back to 18, more harm than good would be done to our society. Alcohol consumption has a whole new look, it's not just to socially drink but it's merely to see who can become belligerent.

Mike Vacanti, high-school superstar

I'm sure that no one will ever care what a stupid high school student has to say about the drinking age, but my voice is going to be heard. My name is Mike Vacanti, and I am currently a Senior at Jefferson Xavier High School. Just recently I threw a party with a couple of friends that enlisted in the U.S. Military this past year. They are both currently 19 and have experienced so much overseas. They also had a huge responsibility on their shoulders as well. However, the cops ended up coming to my house to break up our party due to a noise complaint. They ended up giving us all breathalisers, and we ended up getting minors. What I don't understand is why can a student be trusted enough to fight for his or her country overseas, and not be able to drink? It just doesn't make sense. A teenager can carry an M16 in his hand and be licensed to kill, but he can't throw back a couple Brewskis with his family to celebrate. How is it possible that we can trust someone with our country when we can't trust them to make responsible decisions while drinking.

I just read a very informative article that will help me win my case. The website is: http://www.army.com/articles/august_gi_drinking_age.html

Check it out and you'll see that I actually do know what I'm talking about!

While neither of these postings utilises other forms of multimedia such as images, video or music, they do rely heavily on narrative to connect the various fictional details of their characters into a cohesive character. Hayles (2005) comments on the power of narrative to impact human behaviour, stating that "narratives allow us to construct models of how others may be feeling and acting, models that co-evolve with our ongoing interior monologues" (p. 197). In this sense, Krista and Joel both mobilise narrative and metaphors to construct their fictional characters. In the case of Joel, he connects his online biography to another article online. The hyperlink serves as a stitch of sorts, that further builds the cohesion of his fictional character both in terms of his character's stance on the issue and his representation as pro-military.

In addition to their use of narrative, Krista and Joel also mobilise the different publishing features of the blog software to perform their characters' identities. Unlike some of the other role-play participants who only used the entry feature, both Krista and Joel posted frequently during the role-play and interacted with other role-play

characters primarily through the comment feature of the blog software. Through frequent use of the comment feature instead of the entry feature, their online postings took on the role of a personal correspondence to the other role-play participants rather than a more formal public announcement as would be the case with an entry posting. In this sense, the comment and entry postings became patterns of participation, each with its distinct meaning, each forging a different embodied textuality between the online texts. Krista's choice to comment frequently to other characters helped to repeatedly iterate her identity as The Parent and her stance on the issue.

The coordination of semiotic resources in the depictions of The Parent and Mike Vacanti fall in line with stock representations of parents as protective and authoritative, and student athletes as arrogant. These stereotypical representations make their virtual identities easily read as coherent by the other role-play participants, which in the case of this online role-play promoted high visibility and distribution of one's character.

In follow-up interviews with Krista and Joel, both elaborate on what went into the creation of their fictional characters. Krista states that she framed her character, The Parent, based on her mother, who uses similar lines of reasoning to persuade her against drinking. Furthermore, she says that playing this role helped her to be more confident and to take risks in her writing both in the online role-play and in other writing assignments for the writing course. In this case, the distinction between Krista's online and offline identities is not clear. Rather, we see Krista's real world identity feeding into her virtual identity and the virtual identity further influencing her real world actions. In the case of Joel, he also framed his character on real-world knowing, stating that he was an athlete in high school but that he was not as "cocky" as Mike Vacanti. In other words, the fictional narratives, constructed through writing and discourse, became embodied texts, or limbs that forged connections between virtual and real-world contexts for Krista and Joel.

As the online role-play debate progressed, Joel took advantage of the comment feature on the blog and face-to-face meetings with students after class in order to form strategic alliances with other role-play characters. Krista noticed the emergence of these alliances and felt that she was not having as much influence in the debate as she would have liked. Despite establishing herself as a character with high visibility and significance in the debate (as illustrated by the high number of comments to her biography posting), she was unable to persuade certain role-play participants, Mike Vacanti in particular, that the drinking age should stay at 21. As a result, she decided to remix her use of the online resources. Below is a posting, published via the entry feature, where Krista accused Mike Vacanti of "killing" her sister.

Mike Vacanti killed my sister

In regards to the current debate over the drinking age argument, I just want to let everyone know that my sister Kelsey (while pregnant with her second child) was killed by an underage student named Mike Vancanti. He is also known as a "Superstar" at his high school and has the reputation for hosting parties to minors. Within 2 seconds, a loved one or relative may end up dead due to the number of underage drivers who don't realise the dangers of drinking and driving. Although Mike walked away from the crash with only a fractured femur, he in turn was very hurt by all the pain and suffering endured by our family. My sister left a husband and little 2-year-old boy. It is still hard to accept the fact that my sister was healthy,

young and full of life until one night someone else jeopardized her life. Why does alcohol have to play a role in high school functions? Why can't students have fun being sober?

READ THIS: Alcohol is the No. 1 drug of choice among the nation's youth and kills more teens than all other illicit drugs combined. More than one third of all traffic deaths among 15-20 year olds involve alcohol.

Like Krista's biography for the parent, this posting also mobilises narrative. Yet Krista's narrative choices in this posting implicate others' embodied texts and hence their bodies into her narrative. Also important to note is that in this posting Krista mobilises the use of the *entry* feature for her posting rather than her patterned use of the *comment* feature. By doing this, her text not only gains greater visibility but also claims more "objectivity." Up until this point, the entry feature had only been used for news announcements, posted by the media roles. Being the first to break this unstated rule, Krista's posting became influential in the debate.

At this point in the debate, Krista had already established her embodied presence in the debate via repeated performance of comment postings to other players. Because her presence in the debate was well established, her accusatory posting was read and taken up by many of the other role-play participants as legit. Not only did the other participants accept the content of Krista's posting, but many used the content to further perform their own characters' identities through comments that either expressed sympathy for The Parent's loss or used the event to bolster their stance in the drinking age debate.

In a post-debate interview with Krista, she described this posting as being her most powerful moment in the debate. Furthermore, she revealed that it was the asynchronous, non-face-to-face features of the blog software that gave her the courage to post this fictional event. In this sense, it was the collaboration of various semiotic resources, writing and software code to name just two, that provided Krista with new limbs for making meaning and as a result made this posting so influential.

In looking at the materiality of the above posting, it is also important to note that this posting had physical consequences for some of the role-play participants. Most notable was the feeling that Joel, the initial author or "seamstress" of Mike Vacanti, experienced upon reading Krista's posting. In an interview with Joel, he described himself as getting a stomach ache after reading Krista's posting and not knowing what to do. Looking to the interview transcript at the beginning of this article, it is clear that Joel's role-play identity as Mike Vacanti, albeit fictional, is not a mere text, disembodied, but is in fact an extension of the multisensorial network that is Joel's physical body. In many ways this clustering of related texts becomes a limb forged through writing across media. Yet, it is key to note that this limb does not solely belong to him. In the case of Krista's accusatory posting, it was a collaborative process involving several role-play participants that brought this aspect of Mike Vacanti's identity into being. In other words, Mike/Joel's body is being written into being by others' besides himself. It is here that we run into situations involving what might be considered "contested limbs."

The entry and comment to follow further explore the idea of blurred bodies and contested limbs. In the entry below, posted by Joel, The Parent's brother Mario

Bensen, a fictional character invented for purposes of this blog entry, has just killed three teens while driving intoxicated.

Breaking news

A local Wayzata, Minnesota man was involved in a multiple death drunk driving incident. Mario Benson (uncle of The Parent), age 63, a Driver's Education Instructor at Wayzata High School, is being charged with killing three adolescent boys. Benson, who was driving home from the Red Rooster Lounge and Restaurant, entered the neighbourhood driving his 1986 Honda Prelude. According to the police Benson said that he did not see the kids playing in the street until right before he hit them. The boys were 8, 9, and 11 years old. ... As a result of the accident, Benson's blood alcohol level was tested. The results were a B.A.C. level of 1.56, almost twice the amount of the legal limit. ... People always believe that it is the young and naive underage drinkers that cause all of these accidents, but out of all of the accidents that I have seen throughout my time as an EMT, most of the time it is the older, mature adults that are behind the wheel....My heart goes out to the families."

Statistics to Remember:

According to DrunkDrivingStatistics.com,

- Of the 8,256 alcohol related traffic deaths recorded in 2004, 91% of the deaths were a result of drunk drivers ages 21+.
- -68% of the 91% were in between the ages of 45-65.

Different from Krista's accusatory entry, Joel has written his posting in the style of a newspaper article. This text is not authored by Mike Vacanti, but rather by a fictional journalist, that Joel has invented for purposes of this entry. Joel commented in an interview that he chose to write this entry instead of denying the murder accusation made by Krista, because he felt that it had already received enough attention. By creating yet another fictional event, Joel stated that he hoped to divert attention away from Krista's accusatory posting. The comment below was posted by Krista/The Parent to Joel's "Breaking News" entry and appeared near the very end of the debate. As Krista's comments below reveal, she, like Joel, felt the bodily effects of having others write one's body into being, creating limbs that one does not want.

First of all, this is a false accusation. I do not have an uncle named Mario, I have no relatives that even live in the state of Minnesota!

Second of all, I am shocked by this outlandish report coming from a high school kid who hosts parties for underage kids which is a big mistake!

Third of all, I request that you, Mike Vacanti, settle upon the fact that you killed my sister and that is why you are trying to attack my family in anyway possible, just to make yourself look better.

Please let people know that this is NOT true... since it is a lie!!

DO NOT BELIEVE THIS MESSAGE. IT IS A LIE!!

This blending of voices and identities in the comment above show Krista/The Parent as thinking and acting within both the virtual and real worlds at the same time without even noticing. At one moment (lines 1-7), Krista confirms the norms of the role-play situation by speaking through her fictional role, The Parent, to re-establish authority and re-accuse Mike Vacanti of manslaughter. In the last line, however, Krista breaks

out of the role-play frame to plead that other students, the audience of the blog, not believe this fictional event. This blurring of identities or entanglement of limbs presents Krista/The Parent as uncertain how to reconcile the claims that others have made to her body. Most notably, she directly addresses Joel, demanding that he retract the limb that he has written into being. Desperately trying to sever the limbs that have been linked to her body against her will, Krista/The Parent does not know what to do. Much like Joel describes in his follow-up interview, Krista feels personally wronged, perhaps even violated, revealing that fictional events can elicit physical reactions.

DISCUSSION

In the situation highlighted above, we see the bodies of Joel and Krista as patchwork compilations of texts, dispersed across online and offline contexts. Through writing and mobilising various semiotic resources, they have repeatedly performed their role-play identities for multiple audiences, creating a network of texts, which constitute extensions of their physical bodies. These extensions, or textual limbs, not only serve to establish presence online, as we saw with both Krista and Joel, but also become a system of sensation as these limbs expand the body's network of multisensorial knowing. This is most evident in Joel's physical reaction of nausea to the online actions of his fictional identity, Mike Vacanti.

In making visible the textual limbs that extend beyond the skin, it is crucial to name the material consequences of the networked body. The case of Krista and Joel also illustrates how the building of bodies is not solely an individual practice; rather, sections of the body can be forged or appropriated by others for their own purposes. These appropriations may cause the formation of unwanted or "contested" limbs, in which real-world bodies try to sever ties with certain textual limbs that represent them in ways unwanted.

This exploration of the body's boundaries and the struggles over contested limbs is not meant to discourage use of online, virtual environments for learning. Rather, the goal is to make visible the body as fully present in the process of learning as it occurs across contexts online and off. Rather than drawing lines between what counts as online and offline participation or in-school and out-of-school behaviours, our efforts are better allocated toward understanding the movement of these lines. As Hayles (2005) notes, the permeability of these boundaries is significant; "rather than attempt to police these boundaries, we should strive to understand the materially specific ways in which flows across borders create complex dynamics of intermediation" (p. 242).

Having a deeper understanding of these boundaries helps us to better examine patterns of engagement and participation online, especially for those, youth in particular, who use the media as a vehicle for identity exploration. Just as teaching has attended to the power dynamics and social interaction of writers composing texts in collaborative contexts face-to-face, so too must we be thoughtful of the human-techno collaborations that occur and how they make possible new patterns of human interaction and communication.

Furthermore, an understanding of the flows of information through and across borders promotes a more critical approach to the remix-based practices of media composition

and distribution, wherein media-makers reformulate existing media content into new media text creations. In other words, media-users may appropriate the limbs of others to forge and network their own identities. Increased attention to these practices of remix, with explicit focus on how meaning is transformed and “repurposed” via use in different contexts, promotes greater awareness of context, audience and purpose of online participation.

And finally, to address issues of fictional violence or other ethical considerations, it is necessary to structure reflection of online role-play experiences. After finishing the role-play, whether it involved fictional violence or not, we must break the fictional role-play frame to “re-frame” the context. Edmiston (2000) suggests educators forge “imaginary dialogues” wherein students participate in post-debate discussion by shifting roles to evaluate the actions of their previous roles. For example, in the case of Krista and Joel above, the post-debate discussion would involve Krista taking on the perspective of “Mike Vacante” to evaluate the role-play actions of “The Parent.” Edmiston claims that through imaginary dialogues, students develop “answerability”, an understanding of how their actions, whether real or virtual, online or off, impact others. Just as a sense of conscience develops gradually overtime, so too does “answerability” or what Thomas (2007b) calls “accountability”.

To further explain this developmental process, Thomas (2007b) offers a progression of stages for online identity development. She describes these four stages as 1) Ego, 2) Original Choice, 3) Refinement, and 4) Accountability. In “Ego,” the first stage, users see their online identities as free, “all about me, me, me”. It is in this stage that users see everything online as a game and thus not to be taken seriously. It is perhaps here that we might place Krista’s online identity development of The Parent.

The next stage Thomas describes as “Original Choice”, wherein users grapple with issues of whether to represent their online identities as realistic or fantasy. Third, we arrive at the stage of “Refining”, a process where users continually travel back and forth between different identities selecting qualities they want to keep and others they want to discard. In the final stage in Thomas’ identity model, that of “accountability”, users start to feel responsible for their online actions and develop the answerability that Edmiston (2000) discusses with his process of imaginary dialogues.

Whatever the online learning situation may be, a more networked understanding of the body demands that we consider the flesh and sensation imbued in the words and media content we share online. Amassed over time, these seemingly inert texts build bodies, the storied, living bodies of our students. In handling these student bodies, we must thoughtfully attend to the design and implementation of learning scenarios as they occur across contexts. It is with our textual limbs, that perhaps this exploration can begin.

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Manuscript received: October 10, 2010

Revision received: January 1, 2011

Accepted: April 29, 2011