

# MULTIMODAL STYLE AND THE EVOLUTION OF DIGITAL WRITING PEDAGOGY

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Notions of style—particularly the idea of multimodal style—are key in the ever-evolving digital composition framework. If indeed composition is undergoing a multimodal turn (see Faigley; George; Kress; Kress & Jewett; Kress & van Leeuwen; Lanham; Lankshear & Knobel; New London Group; Porter; Selber; Selfe; Selfe & Hawisher; Takayoshi & Selfe; WIDE Collective; Wysocki, 2001; Wysocki, 2004; Yancey), understanding the connection of multimodal style to production and analysis is paramount. Digital composition, in calling forth the use of multiple meaning-making modes, places stress on the existing logocentric composition framework, thereby placing stress on logocentric conceptions of style. In a period when digital compositions constantly evolve, conceptions of style evolve as well, and the boons and banes of multimodal style in digital realms are all related to boundless iterations. After all, if the act (and enactment) of style is difficult enough to grasp when dealing only with words that it has sustained scholarly inquiry for thousands of years, what happens when style is no longer bound by the printed page, bound by the essayistic traditions of composing for delivery on 8.5 x 11 white sheets of paper? As Collin Brooke wrote, it is important to discover what happens in digital composing when “style escapes the cage that print technology represents” (2002).

At the most basic level, if style is seen as a composer making choices, ultimately revealing patterns and providing style in the sense of a distinct manner of composing something, then the choices open to a digital compositionist are simply exponentially greater when working in multiple modes than in a singular mode. For example, although stylistic inquiries in an alphabetic text *could* have focused on some overall visual elements (e.g., font, use of bullets, paragraphing, etc.), they usually just focused on elements related to words and sentences (e.g., sentence variation, schemes, tropes, and figures, not to mention the various application of static abstractions). In contrast, a stylistic look at a digital video could involve numerous static visual elements, moving visual elements, audio components, and textual components, not to mention how they are all mixed together (or separated). This proliferation of choices is similar to what Kress argued about the complexity of multimodal composing:

[T]here are now choices about how what is to be represented should be represented; in what mode, in what genre, in what ensembles of modes and genres and on what occasions. These were not decisions open to students (or teachers or textbook makers) some 20 years earlier. (2003, p. 117)

Although one could read Kress's concerns merely as inventional choices, they eventually translate to production choices, and style is part and parcel of every step of the digital composing approach. Similarly, if we believe that changes in style result in changes of meaning (Beardsley, 1969, p. 7), then there is much at stake when there are multiple modes with their own styles to consider, especially in the consideration as to whether our digital invention reach exceeds our digital composing grasp. The ability to craft something rhetorically effective with a digital text, then, depends on one's ability to grasp style on a deep analytical and productive level.

In a multimodal work, a singular mode could stand out from the intended multimodal whole and thus greatly affect the perceived meaning of the entire work. In other words, whether you're a dualist or not, a singular mode can be separated from the whole and greatly affect the meaning of a text because of how one perceives the stylized content of the mode in question. For example, if a composer constructed a webtext that focused on persuading people to adopt a pro-life abortion view, that webtext would be perceived quite differently by its audience—regardless of identical textual and visual content—if the audio playing over the webtext was AC/DC's "Highway to Hell" versus Albinoni's "Adagio." This is not to say that the classical piece represents a more "highbrow" Ciceronian style and is therefore more rhetorically effective, but simply to illustrate that the attitude, stance, and lyrics of the AC/DC song would be taken completely differently within the context of the multimodal whole of the pro-life argument and thus change the meaning of the webtext itself. "Adagio" might strike a somber note that reinforces the seriousness of the topic, but "Highway to Hell" could be taken as a chastising, religious-oriented rebuke to those who do not share the views of the webtext's creator. In addition, playing the songs softly would not translate to some kind of "lessened" rhetorical effect. It also points to the intellectual recklessness of privileging the icono-textual aspects of the argument like many of the field's multimodal textbooks and scholarly approaches do. In another vein, there will be people who abandon the pro-life webtext (and thus its argument) on the production level simply because it had a song playing that could not be stopped or interacted with, a choice in and of itself that betrays a lack of audience awareness within dominant social consumption patterns of webpages revealed by prolonged use. In some sense,

the use of the two songs mentioned above would be noteworthy because they already have an established ethos that can be elicited (or counteracted).

This notion recalls the idea of available designs in the multimodal composition process as formulated by the New London Group. The composer accesses existing designs that carry some sort of meaning and during the process of design, transforms them into the redesigned and re-deploys them for different semiotic purposes.

Similarly, other scholars address the complex diffusion of style in various meaning-making modes by examining how style is distributed throughout modern cultural constructs. Barry Brummett, for example, argued for the importance of understanding style and how it functions because it is “the basis for organizing the social today” (2008, p. xiii). Brummett identifies the importance of style to both individual and collective meaning in contemporary society:

[S]tyle creates tensions between social allegiance and individuality, tensions likely to increase under conditions of postmodern complexity. The social organization of style is never value free. Style’s aesthetic organizes such value-laden dimensions of the social as gender and sexual identity, class, time, and space. (2008, p. 43)

In a similar vein, Brummett argued “there are cohesive clusters of style—movement, gesture, speech, vocabulary, decoration, and the like” that can be read and utilized in certain social ways. Providing one of what could be countless examples, Brummett noted how “‘Hippie style’ may or may not be currently fashionable, but it nevertheless remains a style that is available to be mined for its signs and meanings, and it may go in and out of fashion over the years” (2008, p. 4). In other words, what digital style accesses is a slew of social patterns, histories, and technological patterns. Ewen also implicated the immense importance of style to the social when he defined style as “a way that the human values, structures, and assumptions in a given society are aesthetically expressed and received” (1988, p. 3). Taken together, a view of style in the larger societal sense espoused by Brummett and Ewen is important for the enterprise of digital composition. For one, if style is such an intrinsic part of social formation, if it is indeed powerful enough to be simultaneously repellent and attractant, it cannot help but be implicated in the rhetorical effectiveness of digital texts in every stage of the composing process.

In addition to needing to understand the distribution of multimodal style in established and evolving social contexts, digital composition’s embrace of

other modes naturally recalls other disciplines' concepts of style. After all, other notions of style have developed in disciplines that have traditionally been much more multimodal than English studies. The opposing tensions between style in English studies and just one discipline, art history, for example, could fruitfully complicate notions because multimodal style cannot be shoe-horned into a lone discipline's previous understandings. For example, the influential early art scholar Wölfflin categorized an "expressive" base for style rooted in personal, national, and period representational tendencies, which congeals many English studies theories of author, text, and genre into one notion. Also, what Milic identified as psychological monism is mirrored in art history by what Genova called the "signature view"—"a distinctive ensemble of the characteristic ways an artifact is made in order to place greater emphasis on the individual maker" (1979, p. 315) and elevate the innate characteristics of the artist. Additionally, Genova claimed the signature view is damaging because it denies the vital role style "plays in creating and discovering meaning" (1979, p. 315), which is basically opposite of the arguments against monism. Similarly, art history has provided new schemas, such as having perfected style as a cataloging tool (see Elsner, 1996, p. 106) in order to make some sense of the vast amount of artistic works. I argue this is what students, teachers, and citizens of the digital age do (whether consciously or unconsciously) in order to make sense of the proliferating digital texts around them—we align ourselves with certain styles as a means of sifting through and determining what should be focused on and recalled, what should be discarded and remembered. Art history also has the "meaning-expressing model," where meaning is the primary function of style but still plays a role in identification (Genova, 1979). In some ways, this view is like a hybrid of the monistic views Milic identified (psychological monism and Crocean aesthetic monism); in a digital composition where more modes are capable of being styled, this meaning-expressing model can become a powerful concept.

The aforementioned art history concepts are not alone in holding promise; important digital composition behaviors and predilections could also be understood by examining stylistic conceptions rooted in psychology (see Brummett, 2008, p. 2) anthropology, and biology (see Bang, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Postrel, 2003, p. 32). However, despite the possible contributions other disciplines' ideas hold for developing multimodal style, approaching beneficial contemporary theories of style in digital composition means discerning complex notions of style that dovetail with, and also rupture, dominant existing conceptions of style within the framework of English studies.

## EVOLVING CONCEPTIONS OF MULTIMODAL STYLE

Using traditional composition textbooks as an example, Woodman (1982) pointed out prevailing conceptions of style, thus illustrating a proliferation of implied practices even when only working with alphabetic texts:

Be sure to follow the style of academic documentation (style as format); Standard edited English is the style likely to be acceptable to your readers (style as grammaticality); Try to write in a clear and readable style (style as precision); Varied sentence patterns promote a pleasing style (style as syntactic variation). Density of embedding is characteristic of a mature style (style as syntactic complexity); Modern readers prefer a plain style (style as linguistic register). (1982, para. 6)

While the guises Woodman pointed out cover much stylistic ground and are still quite common in contemporary textbooks and pedagogical approaches, the complexity that multimodal style adds to the equation means that other iterations of style are missing or under-theorized. The viewpoints and attitudes applicable in the spaces where composers use computers and various semiotic modes to form new types of digital compositions give rise to ever-evolving notions of style. What follows are existing iterations of multimodal style that I have developed, a process that included years of teaching multimodal composition, years of analyzing and creating a variety of digital texts, and years of collecting what amounts to thousands of students' rhetorical reflections about their own multimodal works. One of the things that spurred my interest in multimodal style was the importance I noted that students placed on multimodal style across all aspects of the composing process, as discussed in their rhetorical reflections. For example, when prompted to discuss why they chose a particular topic, students often cited a desire to approximate the style of a particular work they had admired, or they chose a particular style they identified with a positive, professional ethos, but one they could nonetheless definitely pull off with their multimodal composing skills. While some of these existing/evolving iterations of multimodality might recall previous notions of style, all are still under-theorized from our established iterations of style in digital compositions, but transcending these entrenched notions is important because of the integrated nature of multimodal style to the analysis and production of digital texts.

## STYLE AS TECHNICAL PROWESS

In this iteration, style is primarily defined and achieved by expressing mechanical superiority/expertise. *Style as technical prowess* privileges how technologies meld with existing semiotic systems to create new artifacts or the ways technology is used to foster new expression (similar to the idea of the redesigned from the New London Group). In short, an individual's expertise with digital composing technologies (e.g., software) allows for a certain type of production, which in turn allows for a particular style that is not within the digital composing repertoire of most people. Indeed, the style often becomes the text in the eyes of the audience who cannot make it—and in many cases the actual technical style ends up being valued above content by the composer and thus becomes the marker for the audience. However, it is important to note that the advanced technical style is neither patently positive nor negative; its rhetorical effect, as noted before, is bound up in evolving technologies and the multimodal style conventions that change as the social practices associated with those technologies change. In short, *style as technical prowess* recalls the social recognition captured in Holcomb and Killingsworth's definition: "[S]tyle is a performance of identity using a recognized form within a cultural context" (2010, p. 168).

An early example taken from the Web would be the use of animated GIFs, which showcased a certain technical capability on the part of the composer (particularly for those unfamiliar with how to make them), thus imbuing pages with a certain sense of style, and often becoming the marker of "wow" technical factor even when the animated GIF was rhetorically inappropriate. Nowadays, the animated GIF is often seen as *the* marker of a cheesy second-generation site or is used to mark an ironically bad web page. For example, The Geocities-izer, a website that promises to make any other website "look like it was built by a 13-year-old in 1996," relies heavily on placing animated GIFs in the mirrored site. While the field tends to suspect that an unyielding focus on technical prowess is damaging because it supersedes "higher order" critical and rhetorical concerns, *style as technical prowess* nonetheless shows how important advanced digital composing can be to digital text production, and how a wide range of rhetorical critical possibilities are thus opened up for production and analysis alike.

## STYLE AS DIFFERENCE

Although style as difference has long been covered under the aegis of doing something with distinction, or of simply being a matter of unteachable

essence (as in psychological monism), the digital iteration may rest simply with actual difference. However, *style as difference* is intrinsic to current digital compositions, particularly if we are indeed suffering from an abundance of information and it becomes more difficult to attract attention (as Lanham argues). In addition, there is also the issue of what Schilb has called rhetorical refusals, instances where a composition purposefully elides the expectations associated with its particular intention; this notion seems apt for digital compositions, where what is often engaged with and shared with others amounts to novel constructions.

Using style as the means to attract attention, though, also presents a problem, for as Lanham suggested, purposeful self-consciousness is not highly regarded within our culture (2006, p. 142). Furthermore, *style as difference* is not tied to text alone, as Sonya Foss's definition of visual novelty attested: "[S]ome dimension of the form, structure, or construction technique of the image stands out as exceptional or extraordinary" (1993, p. 215). The elements Foss refers to could include such things as exquisite detailing, superb craftsmanship, or a finely finished surface—elements that stand out in this age of mass-produced and often poorly crafted objects. The technical novelty may result from a different scale than usual—miniature or grand—so that it generates awe and admiration (1993, p. 215).

In connection, I would argue a notion of digital composition pedagogy expertise is intended to help students and scholars avoid producing more ho-hum "mass produced and often poorly crafted objects." (Even though, sometimes, as in the case of Prezi versus PowerPoint, audiences can be so negatively overwhelmed by the paradigm of one form, they react positively to something in a novel form no matter how well the new is done.) Also, Foss's ideas are tied to the technical and thus recall *style as technical prowess*; however, novelty is the ultimate goal in *style as difference* and even though that may be achieved through technical ends, *style as difference* is more outwardly focused on attracting audience and differentiating itself from what's out there now on the whole. *Style as technical prowess* is more focused on attracting audience by promoting self-ability and achieving novelty through technical ends. What unites them, however, is the importance of digital production capabilities in fully achieving either.

## STYLE AS SUBSERVIENCE

In contrast to ideas of style that center on individual expression, this notion posits style as a result of boundaries erected and enforced by groups with rigid attention to context. This notion also supposes that composing pleasure (and

stylistic impact) is rooted in the familiar, not the novel, and often attempts to enforce the familiar with stylistic “technological barricades” such as character limits, image-size limits, and text boxes. This is to be found, for example, in the case of most content management systems, which usually limit the number of stylistic “interruptions” available to the author-designer severely (perhaps the most widespread example would be course management software like WebCT and Blackboard). *Style as subservience* is thus related to notions of compositional efficiency by limiting or eliminating traces of the individual (see Katz) and intractable notions of genre (see Bawarshi; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 55-56). However, within this stylistic mode, opportunities for *style as difference* still present themselves, but the composer can risk much by not keeping to convention. There may be rigidly enforced conventions associated with the existing practices that can cause trouble when broken. The other downfall is that *style as subservience* can be implied when it is not meant to be, and subservience can be read as the opposite of *style as difference* when implicated in a good way.

## **MULTIMODAL STYLE CASES IN POINT: MEDIAWIKI AND LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD**

To illustrate the ways these multimodal style iterations overlap, compete with, and co-extend each other with regard to rhetorical benefits and drawbacks, I will look at examples related to digital composition. One example is related to a platform for building a digital text, and the other centers on the retelling of a traditional tale in digital form.

To begin, a digital text produced in MediaWiki provides a brief example of how the benefits and drawbacks of these three approaches are mediated by production aptitude. Students or teachers without the means to approach *style as technical prowess* would, most likely, have an external person set up the wiki. No matter what the text is being built, then, the text will have the same default design to start. If the students or teachers hope to enact *style as difference* with their digital text, they would not be able to do so without a more developed knowledge of digital production. That is, they would need to be able to access the backend of the database hosting the wiki to effect any rhetorical changes. Those who do not access the background (or lean on the expertise of the system administrator or some such person to do it for them), would—regardless of whatever the written style of the wiki text—end up calling forth the multimodal style of Wikipedia, which exists using the same open-source MediaWiki software default with only a few minor tweaks. Thus, some technical production expertise



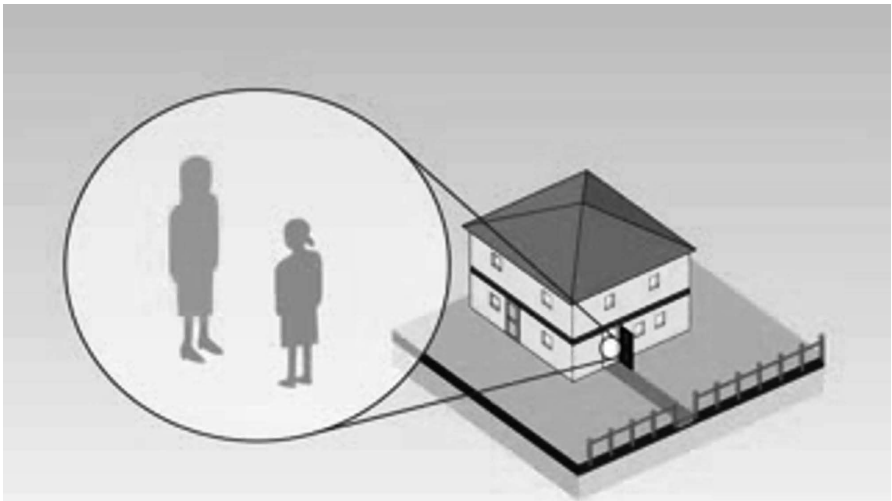
is needed to manipulate the backend to move beyond the default settings that give Wikipedia its main look and stylize the author's content instead of re-perpetuating the defaults. If not, the wiki will have the default picture of a sunflower in the upper left, be unable to upload certain file attachments, and use the defaults for color and font as well. Thus, the text on such a wiki would fall under the heading of *style as subservience* whether that was what the author intended or not, with the audience reacting to a similar way as well. While some audience members might view the hypothetical MediaWiki text as trustworthy because it resembled such a known commodity as Wikipedia, still more people would react negatively to it, particularly in academia, where its ethos is colored less by its enormously helpful use as a heuristic device and more by negative concerns about reliability and mutability. In short, the entire process of building and maintaining the wiki—regardless of whatever the actual content is—is mediated by digital production expertise, which in turn translates to a style, which ultimately determines if the text is perceived as subservient, transcendent, successful, or rhetorically inappropriate. Such a range of possibilities points to the importance of understanding multimodal style on a deep level in digital pedagogy.

The next example centers on the popular fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood*, which is found in variants all over the world, with the variant that took root in the United States popularized by the Grimm Brothers. I have selected a tale with multiple variants in order to better interrogate the connection between stylistic variant and stylistic value: Holcomb and Killingsworth, in adapting Leech and Short, posit that “Stylistic variant refers to alternate expressions for roughly the same thing, while stylistic value refers to the consequences (what is gained and lost) by choosing one alternate over another” (2010, p. 2). What I argue based on looking at variants of *Little Red Riding Hood* is that stylistic value in contemporary digital composition terms is largely a consequence of multimodal style, especially the text's perceived novelty as accomplished through technical prowess. In other words, the more work that seemingly went into a text, and the more it transcends the digital composition capabilities of the average person and those of other texts they have seen, the more likely the stylistic value will resonate strongly. After all, a well-worn tale such as *Little Red Riding Hood* would seem to hold no further surprises. However, on March 7, 2009, Tomas Nilsson uploaded a re-interpretation of the classic tale as part of a university assignment. Within a month, the Swedish graphic design/communication student's video had attracted more than 500,000 views and almost all of the comments run along the lines of the following: “Oh my God!”; “How long did that take to make?”; “I hope you got an A for this!”; and some combination of “awesome” modified by swear words.

Given that the story (the content) is so well-known as to be almost blasé at this point, what has attracted people to Nilsson's video is the stylistic value of its re-telling, especially when a look at the video reveals that pieces added to the original story are more in line with elements of style I have spoken of in the preceding section on iterations of multimodal style rather than extending the story's content in any meaningful way. Ultimately, these additional elements reshape the meaning of the text itself because of the stylistic values attached to them by the audience.

The approach established in the beginning of Nilsson's video is the dominant one taken throughout: (1) The viewer's focus is constantly moved along different planes (i.e., right to left, top to bottom, from the edges to the middle, middle to the edges, etc.) (2) The focus switches constantly between large-scale and small-scale views of similar places, and (3) Diagrams, particular many employed as a type of visual footnoting, are employed throughout. The video begins with a "book" coming out of a bookshelf and ends with that book closing and returning to the bookshelf (Figure 1).

Multimodal style offers an interesting lens to view this piece as an instructor. For one, this video illustrates problems that occur when instructors purposefully or unknowingly privilege text within a multimodal work. Though primarily reliant upon visual storytelling, there is still plenty of text involved, and much of it is illegible given the piece's spatial elements and its delivery through YouTube. In other words, if the instructor is assessing how such a text works by looking at the text, this piece would suffer, even though the visual elements provide the

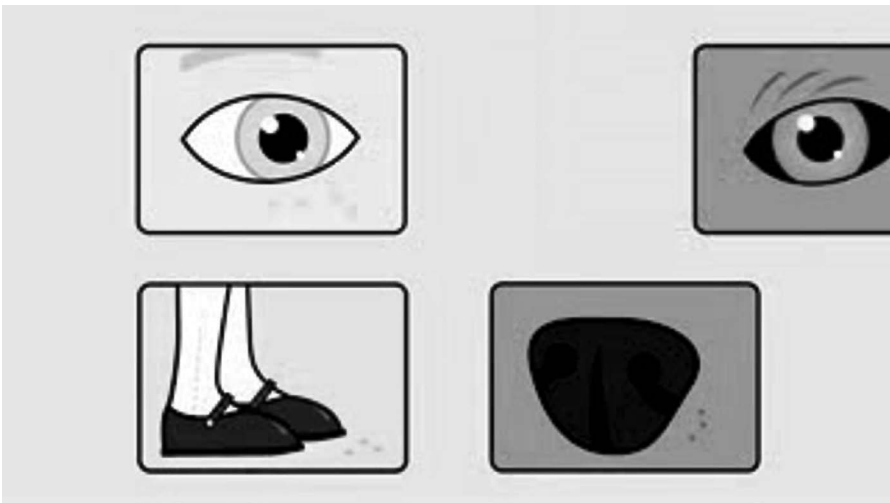


*Figure 1: Beginning of cut-out view of Little Red Riding Hood and Mother.*

containers for text in the form of a diagram and are more readily recognizable as such.

In addition, if classical stylistic approaches were the only means of interrogating style here, some things could be illuminated sharply while other important stylistic elements reside in the shadows. For example, some classical rhetorical constructs are directly applicable to this piece. The constant switching between parts and wholes, for examples, recalls *synechdoche*, *metonymy*, and *metalepsis*. The part where close-up squares of two eyes, shoes, and a canine-looking nose are on the screen, the part in the story where the main characters first meet, is an example of *synechdoche* (Figure 2). However, there is a temporal complexity in this example that the *synechdoche* is situated within but cannot adequately address: this scene carries more meaning and suspense by not having all four elements emerge simultaneously—Red Riding Hood's feet are shown first walking, then stopping, leading to her widened eye, then the Wolf's widened eye, and then finally the twitching nose.

The video engages in visual *exergasia* (repeating the same idea changing words/delivery) in the constant use of diagrams. Also, there is visual *antanaclasis* (the repetition of a word in two different senses, usually for comic effect): Red Riding Hood meets the Wolf, who questions her about where she is going, and a comic talking bubble appears above Red Hiding Hood that contains an image of her Grandmother; almost immediately, comic thought bubbles emanate from the Wolf to Red Riding Hood's bubble containing Grandmother, and a complete listing of nutrition facts appears right next to the old woman. In other



*Figure 2: Synechdoche with Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf.*

words, Grandma is conceived of as a sickly old relative by Red Riding Hood and as food by the Wolf. Taken together, these few examples show how classical stylistic strategies are adaptable to digital texts and can offer some significant rhetorical nuances that can aid with analysis and production; however, the examples also show there is a lot more going on in this text than the classical tropes can make sense of.

For one, the elements of multimodal style that I identified and developed previously in this chapter, *style as technical prowess*, *style as difference*, and *style as subservience*, all play a large role in the understanding of the video. As viewer comments attest, most people are wowed by the technical prowess involved with making the video and routinely inquire how long it took to make. With that in mind, there are elements of the video that, on the surface, seem to support the viewpoint that the whole reason behind creating the text was to represent *style as technical prowess*. A look at some of the elements introduced to the story by Nilsson would seem to bear this out. The Volkswagen bus, for example, was certainly *not* in the original story but it receives a rather long view (especially in the context of how the piece was edited) of 10 seconds. That view is mostly devoted to showing the aerodynamics of the VW (Figure 3), then a cutaway view from the side to expose its innards (Figure 4). These views do not contribute significantly to what would classically be deemed the content of the story, but these views contribute mightily to the *style as technical prowess* of the piece, which in turn affects the overall content of the piece as perceived by readers. (Again, this is borne out by almost 7,000 comments in the piece.)

The video also makes use of *style as difference*. A brief look at existing Red Riding Hood tales also available on YouTube shows that Nilsson's version definitely stands out in the context of other Red Riding Hood-related videos, and not even in the sense of the whole video, but within the listing hierarchy of its chosen delivery system. For instance, if one were searching for a Red Riding Hood video, the list of videos comes up, each with a still frame, and almost all show a girl wearing red or a wolf. Nilsson's still picture shows the cutaway side view of the VW. The method, using Flash and After Effects to create the animation, is also a novel way of doing the reinterpretation because of *Little Red Riding Hood's* status as primarily an oral or written story with few illustrations, usually quite representational. In a sense, removing the narration to focus on using only images to carry the story, thus using images to be the "voice" instead of to supplement the voice, is novel in itself.

Despite the novel aspects of the video, it also is bound by *style as subservience*. For one, as alluded to earlier with relation to the text being illegible even when viewed in full-screen mode, the video suffers quality loss in being distributed by YouTube. Ultimately, the style of the video becomes subservient to the rendering

algorithms that support YouTube's ability to upload and stream content. So, despite what many people would read as an adept technician crafting the story, a technician who seemingly has the ability to create almost anything, that technician's content is ultimately mediated by YouTube in what amount to stylistic constraints on the viewer's end. If all of Nilsson's text were legible, as it might be in other formats and venues, that would change the viewing experience of the consumer and alter the conception of the meaning as a whole.

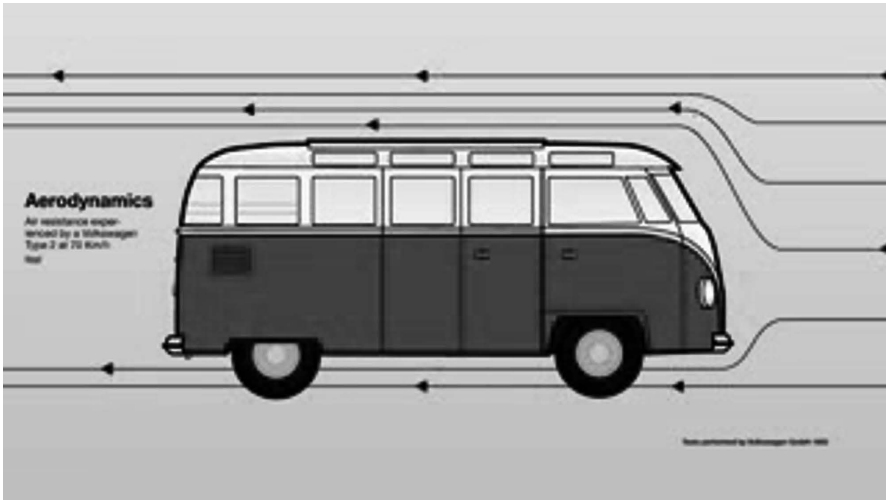


Figure 3: View of VW bus showing aerodynamics.



Figure 4: Cut-away view of VW bus.

In other words, the viewer would probably spend more time reading and making connections between the words and images, rather than concentrating on just the images. Thus, *style as subservience* was enacted on Nilsson's video because it was forced to confine to the realities of YouTube's system.

Though those previous distinctions help shed further light on the video's style, there are still elements missing, particularly as to how style is embedded in social constructs and how that adds to the video's content. The VW, for example, might be picked up on as a repetitive design element by a multimodal composition instructor (e.g., it is red because it complements the protagonist), but neither that nor its existence as *style as technical prowess* would tell the whole story of its inclusion. The VW bus is a particular type of transport, with a particular style that itself agent-lessly seeks a group, and which in turn is taken up by groups seeking a particular style. Thus, one could make the case its inclusion/symbolification will be read differently by not only the author but different cultures. In the United States, for example, the idea of the VW bus can be associated with the cluster of signs Brummett called hippie style (2008, p. 4), and it is a vehicle that is associated with a lifestyle of embracing the outdoors and being a free spirit. As such, it is not associated with the rigid complacency of the suburbs (where Red Riding Hood lives in the video) but with being away from civilization and out in the woods. In the video, then, the style related to the VW is a marker of the rural and serves to underscore Red Riding Hood's distance from the safe and comfortable stomping grounds of her house in the suburbs.

Another social style that is included, and which "updates" the tale, is the use of video game information style. Although related in some sense to the constant use of the diagrams, the video game elements differ from the diagrams and more closely resemble game play elements. For example, after the Wolf and Red Riding Hood meet, a graph reading "Live Stats" appears, allowing us to track how they have split up but the Wolf circles back to Grandma's house. Another example appears later when Grandma and Red Riding Hood are rescued from the Wolf's belly. They are shown together, each with her own "Status" represented by a number of stars and bar graph elements depicting differing levels of "Health" and "Happiness." Though people of all ages play video games, their inclusion in what is in essence a children's fairy tale shows a novel way of skewing the style for a modern audience of children. In addition, video games are often associated with play and not being serious (despite the many games that revolve around killing people), and the game play moments in the video are humorous in light of their novel inclusion in the narrative of an old story.

Other social aspects that come into play in constraining and extending audience resonance with the video's style are related to pre-existing "templates"

that are yoked, in a sense, to *style as subservience*. For one, the video is, in essence, a remix of a video by the Swedish band Slagsmålsklubben, which in turn seems to have been inspired by a ubiquitous series of Flash animation ads for the Scandinavian company Nokia by Australian animator Steve Scott. Both rely on the interplay of close-up and long shot and diagrammatic info and patterns. There is a direct relation in the comments to Nilsson's video as to its positive "wow" effect whether or not people are familiar with the Slagsmålsklubben video beforehand or not.

In the end, the differing conceptions of multimodal digital style in Nilsson's video contribute greatly to the meaning of the piece and make it quite difficult to ascertain previous stylistic areas of debate, such as where form and content begin and end. It may be more accurate in this case to ascertain the content as the story that pre-existed the author and the form as everything he did to it, which in turn both became and reshaped the entire content.

To further situate how iterations of multimodal style resonate in Nilsson's approach, it is illustrative to examine another digital variant of *Little Red Riding Hood* (Figures 5 and 6). As part of the practical element for a Masters in Design, Donna Leishman created "RedRidingHood" in 1999-2000, published it on her website in 2001, and her variant was more widely publicized in 2006, when it was included in the first volume of the *Electronic Literature Collection*. Leishman's variant of Little Red Riding Hood is radically different from the popularized Grimm variant, making Nilsson's variant seem almost a one-to-one retelling



Figure 5: Leishman's Red getting the basket from her mother.

despite his introduction of modern items to the storyline. Both are virtually wordless and rely on visuals and music to engage and carry meaning; Leishman's "RedRidingHood" also hinges on clickable interactivity to uncover additional elements of the narrative. The narrative here involves a complex storyline with hidden content (a diary), a (possible) dream sequence, a pregnant Red Riding Hood, and a Wolf-boy with a gun. As Leishman said, "RedRidingHood is a non-textual animated exploration into engaging the viewer in a recognizable narrative experience, combining the utterly and moderately linear alongside random non-authored sequences (the dream section)" ("Interview"). Leishman also mentioned how important style situated within digital technology was in affecting the invention and planning of "RedRidingHood," which was created using Flash: "A goal of this project was to be interesting to both male and female readers. A highly stylised comic imagery helped serve this and bypass the technical limitations of dial up speed Internet connection typical circa the late 1990's" ("Dissonance"). In other words, just as Nilsson's video is subject to *style as subservience* because of YouTube's realities, Leishman's was subject to *style as subservience* based on the realities of file speeds and how they had formulated audience expectations in 1999/2000; however, whereas the primary repercussion



Figure 6: The screen that allows readers to enter the dream sequence (or not)



to Nilsson's video may have been losing rendering quality, Leishman had to make a conscious decision to render the entire story in a more simple style than she perhaps otherwise would have chosen.

Similar to the reception given Nilsson's work, Leishman's variant met with strong positive reactions upon its initial publication. For example, the introduction to the piece on the *Electronic Literature Collection* states, "Leishman's playful retelling of the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale makes use of comic book vernacular, limited forms of explorative interaction, optional narrative paths, and a jazzy soundtrack. *RedRidinghood* is the type of Flash piece that suggests the potential for complex forms of interactive storytelling without typographic text." Just as the enthusiastic reception for Nilsson's variant was primarily tied to the stylistic value attributed to its technological prowess, early reaction to Leishman's piece was primarily based on the pathos that its novelty and technological prowess aroused. In a review that accompanied an early author interview, Kendall Pata said, "The animation of these drawings is superb" and "flawless"; moreover, Pata noted, Leishman's tale "may be an adaptation, but it is so original and relevant that the older story easily becomes yesterday's news." In fact, a term seen often in early pieces that reference Leishman and her work is "Flash Goddess."

However, it is important to remember that Leishman's was made public in 2001 and Nilsson's video was made public in 2009, and despite a difference of only eight years, the stylistic difference in the way technology is related to understanding and appreciating each digital text is about as pronounced as the stylistic difference between Faulkner and Hemingway. Indeed, those who experience "RedRidingHood" in 2011 rather than 2001 seem to have a much more negative take on it in comparison to early opinions. For one, the entire genre of the clickable Flash narrative is one that seems to be unknown to many users, or at least transcend their currently operating patience levels. The animation itself may have been revelatory in 1999 when it was being built, but advances in speed and attendant image-rendering capabilities have affected what audiences expect. For example, Claudia Cragg, who maintains a blog called "The Writer's Game," talks about the results of testing Leishman's work on her own family:

[T]he three novice DF [Digital Fiction] readers who test-drove RRH [RedRidingHood] did not appreciate all the facets of Leishman's production quite simply because they failed to open the right doors. This may not make them idiots. Instead it means that they came at the project with different levels of gaming and computing exposure, which led them to

make choices that even Leishman may not have anticipated. Only the very youngest, 12, was willing to keep having another attempt to see what had been missed and only she fully appreciated the “Secret Diary” with its Satanic aspirations and the protagonist’s dream sequence for another hidden life as a player in the meat market. (2007)

As Cragg notes, contemporary context is important in considering how people will respond to the text, but what is implied to the test subjects here is that there *is* more to the text, which influences their expectations. On a personal note, I only realized the various facets to this text after becoming frustrated that nothing worked, born out of frustration with the dream sequence. In an unanticipated bit of *style as subservience* that I interpreted as *style as technical prowess* (or lack thereof), I assumed the text was broken because nothing ever came up when I clicked on “shall Red dream?”. Only when I tried it on a different computer whose pop-up blocker actually prompted me about continuing was I able to explore the dream. After reading the intro to the piece on the Electronic Literature Collection, I knew I was missing vast swaths of content but felt I had clicked everywhere I could; I ended up having to research how other people found the content. Thus, while Nilsson’s video was able to take advantage of much improved streaming capacity and wide distribution available through YouTube and the faster connection speeds that support them, Leishman’s work is still stuck in the parameters of the file size that shaped it in 1999/2000 and is further impacted by advances browsers have made to deal with the ubiquity of Flash pop-ups that characterized a previous generation of webtexts and advertising. Thus, through no fault of her own at the time, Leishman’s work suffers in contemporary reception because of the ways current technological realities shape the *style as subservience* of her text.

The other problem lies with *style as technical prowess* related to visuals. For one, the parts of the narratives that might most suggest style as technical prowess are often hidden away in the clickable narrative (i.e., the dream sequence, the diary, and the title sequence). The title sequence where Red’s name grows in dagger-like images, for example, is impressive, and all of the little flourishes of the flowers are not uncovered unless a reader explores. A misreading of Nilsson’s video might mean the viewer skews the analysis even more toward technical prowess; a misreading of Leishman’s clickable narrative means the *style as technical prowess* objects are hidden instead of open as with Nilsson, thus affecting the value of the text. Thus, a viewer who couldn’t find/open those aspects would probably not even develop any sense of *style as technical prowess* when looking at it through a contemporary lens. The one aspect of the main

narrative that does stand out is the ultimate bedroom scene (Figure 7), although that might be more aptly described as *style as difference* because the scene evokes mystery and a rupture to the predominant narrative of *Little Red Riding Hood*: the viewer sees Red in bed, cradling her stomach (which, when clicked, reveals a spinning baby that resembles the Wolf-boy), and the Wolf-boy emerges from behind a wall with a gun. He strokes Red's hair, then she looks directly at the audience, and the piece is over.

With the exception of the bedroom scene, the other piece that jumps out in the main narrative in a *style-as-technical-prowess* sense is the city scene (Figure 8). The window that is lit up needs to be clicked on to continue the story, but just about every window in every building lights up when scrolled over. It creates a fascinating diversion once one finds out there are clickable places hidden in parts of the text, and detracts from the *style as technical prowess* once one realizes no content is hidden behind any of these other windows. While the amount of detail in the buildings themselves may not be enough to create “wow” factor on behalf of the audience, they nonetheless stand out compared to the other buildings and some of the animation that feels clunky by contemporary standards (i.e., Red moving around on her knees among the flowers). While



Figure 7: “RedRidingHood” Bedroom Scene

Nilsson's video did not exactly have stellar character animation (that effort seems to have gone into the VW), as witnessed by the way his Red Riding Hood moves from the house, the facial features in close ups are well done. Looking at "RedRidingHood" today involves seeing it not as it was meant to be seen in 2001 but, constructed as we are by multimodal style and social contexts, seeing it through the lens of 2011 digital texts. As part of Cragg's experiment to have people navigate through Leishman's work, one of her reviewers called it "pretentious," but the main complaint was that "the graphics aren't up to it; this generation is used to video game graphics that are absolutely terrific, so if you're gonna have a sort of computer animated story, really it has to be pretty high quality to keep people's interest" (Cragg, 2007). Cragg's experiment dated from 2008, and it must be added that while Leishman's "RedRidingHood" is fixed in time, the graphics and animation (among other elements) that color our perception of digital texts are constantly evolving toward complexity, not simplicity. As such, it's hard to imagine, given the constraints of bandwidth in 1999, how forward thinking Leishman's text was at the time, but it's difficult, if not impossible, to read through that lens today (with the possible exception of a novel kind of *style as difference* in adding plenty of subversive and feminist wrinkles to a well-established tale).

The iterations of style I have mentioned earlier in this chapter and have applied to the two *Little Red Riding Hood* variants all relate to each other in complex ways in the contemporary moment, and will relate to each other in even more complex ways that may be difficult, if not completely impossible, for a composer to conceive in the future given the inter-related effects of technology and society on texts. While a composer cannot prepare for every eventuality



Figure 8: Cityscape in "Red RidingHood"

relative to the reception of a text in the future, the fact remains that having a hope for a successful text in the future means creating a successful text today, and that involves an intense understanding of the multimodal style of the kinds of texts one wants to make on an analytical and production level, realities that need to be considered on a deep pedagogical level by composition instructors.

## CONCLUSION

Taken, together, the iterations of multimodal style point out the importance of digital style as more than a means of personal expression, more than a means of emotion, more than a cultural construct, more than a matter of taste, and more than an individual choice. Digital style is embedded in material constructs, economic constructs, historical events, and technological production. In short, style is a complex adaptive system (Holland). On the wider scale of style as a complex adaptive system, the powerful use of style in the Nilsson video is now “out in the world,” and it can emerge within a multitude of texts by a multitude of authors (even though it may have been based on two different pre-existing texts). Its style is not a stable form, then, but will lead to a co-evolution of differing styles, which ultimately will re-shape the idea of style within the original video. The video itself might be “fixed” in its place on YouTube, but the elements of its style are not fixed because they transcend containers and taxonomies. There could very well be a “redundant flow” from this video, but it will probably occur in an intriguing web of non-linear objects related to the original video.

On the whole, these iterations of multimodal style point to the necessity of instructor expertise in digital production and analysis when fruitfully engaging issues of digital composition. For example, what others with more knowledge in the audience might see as “mistakes” that detract from rhetorical effectiveness could be falsely construed by the instructor as personal idiosyncrasies beyond the realm of instructor mediation. There is also the issue of an instructor seizing on something as brilliantly conceived by the student that is actually a well-worn default or template without much stylistic cachet. Thinking of how this example would apply in traditional terms, it is doubtful that stylistic aspects in a traditional “text-only” writing teacher’s wheelhouse would have been dismissed as personal idiosyncrasy—i.e., penurious or superfluous use of commas was not seen as a stylistic peccadillo so much as a rhetorical deficiency. This is not to argue that digital pedagogical expertise means adhering to prescriptivism when it comes to style, only that instructor understanding of a wide swath of composing elements is needed when it comes to composing and teaching

sophisticated texts with digital underbellies. This, unfortunately, is not easy to develop in an area that covers a broad range of meaning-making elements and evolves daily.<sup>1</sup>

However, unless instructors can freely engage with digital style on a deep production level, I fear the most common pedagogical approach (because it is easiest to replicate in the current departmental system of most colleges) surrounding digital texts will ignore the need for digital production expertise whatsoever, ultimately meaning composers will be unable to produce what they set out to produce, relying instead on written documents to explain exactly what the composers were trying to accomplish rhetorically. This becomes a detrimental method of communication, cutting the composer off from not only the realities of digital texts but the complex realities and affordances of style: “[O]ne cannot wear or do whatever one likes and declare to the world that the garment or action mean what the individual says they mean” (Brummett, 2008, p. 34). In other words, when relying on a separate text to make the case for the digital text, the latter is severed from reality and given birth by a textual document that never accompanies it in its actual existence, and the nature of the digital text is thus conceived of as vastly different from the composer and actual audience perspective alike. This is dangerous if composition instructors intend to help students become truly active participants who can handle the complex realities of their social, civic, and economic lives. Understanding multimodal style is paramount in the move toward digital composing complexity because it provides the connection to a sophisticated production that resonates with contemporary, and perhaps future, audiences.

## NOTES

1. One way for instructors to approach the complexity of digital texts might actually occur during that most inevitable step of teaching: assessing student work. As Star Medzerian Vanguri argues in this collection, “grading style is teaching style.” Multimodal style is at once global and local, and it recruits so many different semiotic systems (all of which are both static and constantly in flux) that assessing digital work provides ongoing challenges for novice and experienced instructors alike. Vanguri’s chapter “What Scoring Rubrics Teach Students (and Teachers) about Style” offers a way for instructors to start wrapping their heads around the dizzying complexities of multimodal style by thinking more deeply about how style is constructed on rubrics, which can be used to approach the complex aspects of multimodal style in a way that is feasible yet not reductive. The synecdochal aspects of multimodal style provide particular challenges in assessment (e.g., “extracting” words, sound, and/or images from the whole and grading them separately); accordingly, Russell Greer’s “Architectonics and Style” chapter in

this collection could be very helpful in constructing rubrics because he channels ideas from Bakhtin and others to interrogate the intricate relations of parts to wholes in style.

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