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Written Communication 2008 25: 415
DOI: 10.1177/0741088308322552

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Challenges of Multimedia Self-Presentation

Taking, and Mistaking, the Show on the Road

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One privilege enjoyed by new-media authors is the opportunity to realize representations of Self that are rich textual worlds in themselves and also to engage the wider world, with a voice, a smile, imagery, and sound. Still, closer investigation of multimedia composition practices reveals levels of complexity with which the verbal virtuoso is unconcerned. This article argues that while technology-afforded multimedia tools make it comparatively easy to author a vivid text, it is a multiplicatively more complicated matter to vividly realize and publicize an authorial intention. Based on analysis of the digital story creation process of a youth named “Steven,” the authors attempt to demonstrate the operation of two forces upon which the successful multimodal realization of the author’s intention may hinge: “fixity” and “fluidity.” The authors show how, within the process of digital self-representation, these forces can intersect to influence multimodal meaning making, and an author’s life, in consequential ways.

**Keywords:** writing with new media; new literacies; multimodality; digital storytelling; youth media and identity; multimodal text analysis

Without doubt, the robustness of present and emerging new media communication tools and practices offers literacy educators much cause for sanguinity. To take just one example, the mushrooming popularity and influence of such media sharing-cum-social networking sites as YouTube bear cogent testimony to the increasing digital muscle mass of

Authors’ Note: Address correspondence to Mark Evan Nelson, National Institute of Education, Singapore, 1717 Euclid Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94709; e-mail: m_e_nelson@yahoo.com.
John and Jane Q. Public. It appears that to some degree this (limited) democratization of media production and distribution has, in something of a Freirean turn (Freire, 1970), stimulated a leveling of sorts of the relative positions of the power elite and the rest of us, however precipitous that slope still may otherwise be. For a great and growing number of us, forms of and avenues for electronic “self-presentation” (Goffman, 1959), like video production and YouTube, respectively, afford the benefits of getting our interests, our perspectives, our concerns, and our faces out there. Yet there is a crucial term in this calculus that is all too easily overlooked. Making a virtual (read actual and digital) public figure of oneself entails an accountability of its own, whoever one may be. Particularly, too, multimodal, multimedia self-presentation can engage special, subtle commitments that may, in their turn, precipitate significant consequences.

This article details such a story. In fact, it tells the story of a story. The data discussed are drawn from a case study of the digital narrative-creation process and subsequent life experience of a youth named Steven, who participated in an after-school program in digital storytelling at a community center near his home in Citytown, an urban area of California. What is remarkable about Steven’s example is that though his self-presentation was not broadcast much beyond his relatively small community, the image of Steven expressed in multimedia took on a life of its own, a virtual life that reflected consequentially upon Steven’s own real life. The tensions and mobility that attended Steven’s story (both the text and his life) prompted us to conduct an in-depth study of his case, the aim of which was to begin to capture and explicate the complexities and challenges of multimedia composition, within and beyond the composing process, especially for youth. On the basis of this case, and through the conceptual lenses of the theoretical work of Erving Goffman (1959) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), we hereafter argue that while technology-afforded multimedia tools make it comparatively easy for an author to realize a vivid text, they also make it a multiplicatively more complicated matter to vividly realize an authorial intention. We further propose that attendant to processes of multimedia production are aspects of fixity and fluidity that can shape the articulation of presented Selves in quite varied, substantial ways, extending beyond the cessation of the production process itself. With the term fixity, we refer to the role played by multimodal “chronotopes” (Bakhtin, 1981). These conceptual time-space conjunctions, and, importantly, the multimodal textual couplings that effectuate them, can serve to semiotically fix elements of a young author’s identity in particular spatiotemporal frames, to varying effect. By fluidity, we mean the interpretations to which a multimedia
product—and, reflexively, its author subject as well—can be put as it travels within the ecology of the author’s lifeworld. We believe that young authors can be most affected by these forces as they often have yet to develop the ideological autonomy and semiotic control to manage them.

Multimodality and the Presentation of Self

“There is something curious about autobiography,” Jerome Bruner (1990) writes. “It is an account given by a narrator in the here and now about a protagonist bearing his name who existed in the there and then, the story terminating in the present when the protagonist fuses with the narrator” (Bruner, 1990, p. 121). Linde (1993), for her part, offers a less logistical but still “nontechnical” definition of the life story as “what events have made me what I am” or “what you must know about me to know me” (p. 20). Still, too, for Ochs and Capps (1996) “lives are the pasts we tell ourselves” (p. 21). Yet in this age of ubiquitous new media, the what of the story is not the end of the story, as it were. The how and the where play undeniably critical roles.

As to the how, Haas (1996) explains, “materiality is the central fact of literacy—as a cognitive process, as a cultural process, even as a metaphor—by linking these two powerful systems: the material realm of time and space with the quintessentially human act of language” (p. 3). Yet the question of precisely how medium relates to message is an open one—McLuhan’s (1964) famous phrase notwithstanding—though the work of a number of scholars has been helpful in this regard (e.g., see Bolter & Grusin, 1999; Haas, 1996; Harris, 2001; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Manovich, 2001; Mitchell, 1996, 2005).

As to the where, one is put in mind of Appadurai’s (1996) notion of “text-in-motion,” which he sees as emblematic of “the recent past (or the extended present)” in which both people and electronically mediated texts have become massively globalized and mobile (p. 9). The full implications of this trend too have yet to be understood; however, the presently described study represents such an attempt. Our general aim is to contribute to the disentangling of the what, the how, and the where, toward a clearer conception of how Selves are expressed in new media.

To do so we draw important conceptual tools from Goffman, Bakhtin, and others. As will be apparent, our work is theoretically rooted in a diversity of frameworks. We hope to discover and create affinities among these theories and synthesize elements of them in an effort to better understand 21st-century literacies and perhaps to reconceptualize the new literacy studies.
There is no one dominant lens that we bring to this work, and the more or less equal treatment of the theories offered below is an artifact of our synthetic orientation. Frankly, we recognize that just as texts and literacies themselves are inherently multiple and multimodal, so must the theories we engage in understanding literacy practices also be diverse, flexible, and synthetic. The state of our field is such that it is not adequate to principally rely on a Bakhtinian or Vygotskian sociocultural frame, for example. As useful as these perspectives have been and are, they are each too narrowly construed, their explanatory value too limited, to capture the complexities of multimodal composing and communication. Conversely, present theories of multimodal literacy have only just begun to account for how particular sociocultural contexts impact textual meaning making (e.g., see Stein, 2007). So we attempt to reformulate aspects of these and other helpful perspectives into a manifold theory more applicable to our field as it is.

One important theoretical catalyst for conceptualizing this work was the symbolic interactionist\(^2\) (cf. Blumer, 1969) notion of “self-presentation,” which we see as distinct from commonsense understandings of “self-representation” in an important respect. To our understanding, self-representation emphasizes the process of creating an image of oneself, whereas self-presentation, after Goffman (1959), centrally involves semiotically publicizing oneself, expressing the Self before an audience such that the representation of Self—be that a picture, a poem, an essay, a turn at talk, or a multimodal text like a digital story—is constitutive of the face of the public Self. Goffman—who greatly influenced symbolic interactionists but never formally affiliated with them—described the presentation of Self in everyday life as a process whereby the Self and others enter into a moral contract that obliges the public to accord a presented Self all rights and privileges conventionally given to the kind of person a Self purports to be. The obverse of this is that the Self is also accountable for actually being who she presents herself to be and, importantly, not something else. “The others find, then,” Goffman explains, “that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they ought to see as the ‘is’ ” (1959, p. 13). Thereupon, the ubiquity of new media genres of communication prompt us to ask how this dynamic is affected, if at all, when the Self is presented multimodally. What are the terms of the self-presentation contract when the Self is presented via multiple modes (e.g., linguistic, visual, musical) that are compositionally linked, but not organically connected (in the way that copresent speech, gaze, gesture, posture, and so forth are in face-to-face conversation, for instance)?

Kress (2003, 2005) explains that different modes of communication—he is mainly concerned with image and language—offer up potential meaning
according to fundamentally different organizing logics. For instance, language, he explains, is organized along sequential and temporal lines, whereas the meaning potential in images is apt to be realized differently, that is, according to principles of spatial arrangement, like the simultaneous apprehension of different compositional elements. In Kress’s (2003) own words,

The logic of space leads to the spatial distribution of simultaneously present significant elements; and both the elements and the relations of the elements are resources for meaning. The logic of time leads to temporal succession of elements, and the elements and their place in a sequence constitute a resource for meaning. Each of these leads, in the culturally and socially valued modes such as speech and writing and image, to preferred textual/generic forms: narrative in speech and in writing and display in visual modes. (p. 45)

We find these distinctions quite helpful; nonetheless, exploring and understanding the combinatory nature of multimodal meaning, intermodal distinctions notwithstanding, is a further, vital challenge.

On this point, Lemke (2002), in his “Travels in Hypermodality,” surmises that language and image, as a function of “their very incommensurability,” that is, the fact that they present different affordances for meaning making, “mutually contextualize one another” (p. 322). We interpret this to mean that through the juxtaposition, the codeployment of disparate modes of communication, the sense of the semiotic completeness—or “monological pretensions,” to use Lemke’s phrase—of each is dispelled. The differences in the kinds of meaning accordant to each mode evince the fact that neither is telling the whole story, as it were; they each offer up different, and differently organized, pieces of the meaning puzzle. This, we feel, is a powerfully generative idea with respect to our present project and an idea that resonates with another potentially vital conceptual tool for unpacking processes of multimodal meaning making: Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the “chronotope.”

Bakhtin (1981) defines “chronotope” as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (p. 84). He explains this concept of “time-space” as a kind of conjunction of aspects of meaning that flesh each other out, make a situation real and concrete. Importantly, too, Bakhtin explains that the chronotope plays a defining role in shaping cultural identities and the ways people come to think about themselves and each other. It should be pointed out that Bakhtin explores the notion of the “artistic” chronotope as it relates to language qua literature; however, we may notice intriguing parallels with the aforementioned theoretical work of Lemke and Kress. Of the fusion of time and space within the chronotope, Bakhtin writes, “Time becomes, in effect,
palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. An event can be communicated, it becomes information” (1981, p. 250, italics added). The work of these theorists, taken together, invites us to imagine that images and language, which respectively feature dominant spatial and temporal organizations, can, when conjoined, mutually contextualize one another, thereby constituting chronotopes, but of a multimodal kind.

Accepting this, it would perhaps follow that the chronotopic whole would present not competing or even complementary versions of an intended meaning, but a vivid textual representation of ostensible fact: as Bakhtin (1981) puts it, “information.” Chronotopes are “facts” by virtue of vividness and realism, rather than truth value. And Selves presented in multimedia narrative are arguably most factual, in this same sense, in that they are multiply chronotopic: They manifest spatiotemporal meaning potential conceptually within modes, as Bakhtin discusses in reference to literature, and materially across modes, in line with Kress and Lemke (which is not to imply that conceptual and material dimensions of meaning are separable, of course). Recalling Goffman, too, multimodal texts should presumably be received in the social arena as especially full and factual, for the veracity of which the author of the text, the presenter, must accordingly be held accountable.

Finally, too, we want to briefly signal one more necessary consideration. We take for granted, and have argued in previous work (e.g., Hull, Kenney, Marple, & Forsman-Schneider, 2006; Hull & Nelson, 2005; Malinowski & Nelson, 2007; Nelson & Malinowski, 2007), that in general controlling the heteroglossic or polyvocalic (Bakhtin, 1981) quality of meaning making in multimodal texts is a far greater challenge than is the case in linguistic communication alone, for example, but it also seems true that children and youth are particularly susceptible to being “ventriloquated,” to use Bakhtin’s (1981) term, by processes of discourse beyond their control. This is due to the fact that they may have yet to develop the ideological autonomy to fully speak for themselves.

What we are attempting to do in our present work, then, is extend the concept of the chronotope, applying it within the domain of multimodal communication, where time and space are not evoked just in the language of literature, but also in the differing logical organizations of language, image, music, and so forth. In so doing we hope to better understand how multimodality may be implicated in the social construction and presentation of Self through multimedia narratives like digital stories. We see this article as successor, in a sense, to Hull and Nelson (2005), “Locating the
Semiotic Power of Multimodality.” In that article, through a fine-grained multimodal text analysis, we aimed to demonstrate the multiplicative, expressive potential of multimedia composing. In the current article, our objective is to complicate the notion of the semiotic power of multimodality by exploring the invisible social layer of affordances for and constraints on meaning making within the multimodal textual laminate. Crucially, though, this is an article that investigates meaning making at the intersection of the social and the textual. We believe that the social processes that we describe below, that Steven and his story underwent, are founded to an important extent in the interactions of meaning between the images, words, etc., of his multimedia self-presentation (conceptualized and demonstrated in terms of Bakhtin’s chronotope). By the same token, the textual aspects of the story were shaped extrinsically by the social and cultural parameters of Steven’s lifeworld, as were the various meanings constructed in and around this text over time.

Moreover, we argue, and we realize controversially so, that this sort of scenario is more likely to play out in situations of new media authorship than in less multimodal print texts, and here, in sum, is why. A new media text such as a digital story presents a semblance of Self that is seemingly true, in the sense of “true to life,” by virtue of semiotic fullness, its multimodal completeness relative to the printed text. Accordingly, too, this seeming truth appears more likely to be received as truth when the text-object circulates. This is not to say, of course, that self-presentations in other formats do not involve interpretative flexibility or potential consequences. They naturally do, and that actually reinforces our argument. In point of fact, as we will demonstrate below, it is a lack of interpretative flexibility that we attribute to Steven’s self-presentation in a digital story. The evaluation of the interpretation varies, but not the interpretation itself, which is the very essence of what we mean by fixity and fluidity. Multimodality, and the “mutual contextualization” (Lemke, 2002) of modes it entails, was a key factor in this outcome in Steven’s case, we feel, and that is what we endeavor to demonstrate below.

Case Study: “I want to write about me”

Our case study focuses on Steven, who was 12 years old in the spring of 2002 when he took part in an after-school program on digital storytelling. Steven came to the program after having seen other digital stories that had been created by youth at his school who had taken part in the program the previous fall semester. These stories were shown to the entire sixth-grade
class. There was a tribute to an aunt, a recounting of an Indian legend, a story about a trip to another state, a letter to a father—mostly personal stories about their lives and families that children planned, wrote, revised, shared, narrated in their voices, illustrated with images and photographs, and made into brief movies. According to the after-school teacher, who was present when the collection was shown to the sixth-grade class, the children marveled that they could write a story and produce a movie about anything they wanted. The after-school teacher described this recruitment, and her approach to eliciting stories in general, as “an open invitation to write.” The after-school program, with its focus on new media and moviemaking in tandem with reading and writing, was a novelty in this low-income community at that time; technology was then scarce in homes and schools, and the opportunity for creative expression, particularly with digital images and music, was a rarity in a curriculum attentive to standards and academic achievement traditionally defined.

According to his after-school teacher, and according to field notes taken by several participant observers, Steven very much had a story in mind that he wanted to tell, practically from Day One of his participation in the program. It was “a story about me, when I was a baby,” and he readily offered up its details to his “learning partners,” the undergraduate students who volunteered with the after-school program and who scribed as Steven narrated, as was the program’s custom. Very quickly, obvious tensions erupted over Steven’s story, although we would come to understand their nature and significance only much later and over a long span of time, as the research reported in this article proceeded. We tell in this article, then, the story of Steven’s story, as we attempt to unravel its consequences for its young teller; to understand the reactions and emotions it aroused; to document how this digital movie became an artifact with something akin to its own agency, one that contravened to an extent the authorial intentions of Steven himself; and to consider how multimodality may have been implicated in all of this.

Our case study data included ongoing ethnographic observations of the after-school program and the urban community in which it was located; weekly field notes collected during Steven’s participation in the program; retrospective interviews with program personnel, especially the instructor and the program coordinator; a visit to Steven’s home and interviews with Steven and his foster mother 2 years subsequent to his participation in the program; conversations with a range of more peripherally connected others, including a social worker, teachers, and university and community volunteers; and retrospective interviews with Steven himself when he was 17 years
During these retrospective interviews, Steven watched his digital story again, reflected on its composition, updated us about some of the challenging events in his young life, and described his admirable determination to shape his future. We examined these data thematically, looking for patterns across time and participants (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992).

Our case study data spanned a period of 5 years and, in so doing, offered a somewhat rare glimpse of a young person’s trajectory across time and within multiple social worlds and especially the unanticipated role of a digital artifact within it. The primary analysis that underpins this article begins in the next section and centers on Steven’s multimodal text, as we continue to explore the possibilities and constraints of multiple and interacting modalities for meaning making (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Nelson, 2006; Nelson & Hull, in press). In the remainder of this section, however, we complete our introduction of Steven and his movie, briefly detailing the tensions that surrounded the creation of his digital story and recounting how Steven’s self-presentation via his multimodal text continued to exact from him a particular identity years after he had made his movie and his participation in the after-school project had ended.

We note that our multimodal analysis, in the section to follow, is necessarily technical and complexly layered, as any attempt to understand the semiotic realization of multiple modalities requires. But in offering it, we hope readers will not lose sight of Steven and the events in his life that the story initially indexed and then influenced, and that also served to alert us, in important ways to which we were not previously attuned, to how representations of Self in multimodal texts can be shaped contrary to authorial intent and to how those representations can take on a life of their own.

When Steven joined the after-school program and began his digital movie, he was an aficionado of double-Dutch rope jumping and a self-designated “hyper” kid, always moving and active. Friendly and outgoing, at the time he was especially close to Alyssa, a girl his same age who also went to the same school, but whose close acquaintance he was able to make only in the after-school program. Alyssa, who had taken part in the program the semester before, helped Steven import his music for his digital story, and he mentioned her in his script and depicted her and his ability to make her laugh (“crack her up”) in his movie. Steven was known to be a good student at regular school. His after-school teacher recalled that after the first marking period at school, he took care not to share his grades with the other students because he knew that he was the only kid who had gotten straight As, and he didn’t want that identity burden in his peer group. Doing well academically was noted at home; his foster mom had filled a bulletin board at their
apartment with school commendations for spelling bees, grade reports, and other awards, including foosball championships. Steven took part in all of the activities of the after-school program, and it was noted that he did so with equanimity. One field note made a point of mentioning that when Steven lost his small earring while jumping double Dutch on the stage in the back of the community center and had enlisted a group of friends including Alyssa to search for it, he heeded the instructor’s call to abandon the search and come inside without once grumbling or sulking, even though everyone assumed he would be taken to task for the loss once he got home. Steven’s folder of work from the after-school program showed his recordings of procedures for digital moviemaking in neat handwriting; his reflections on other kids’ work (“I like the story, but I think he copied off of Jamal”); his dictated script for his digital story written in the hand of an undergraduate volunteer as well as a typed revision; and his “storyboard” for a subsequent digital story that he was planning to do on—what else?—double Dutch.

Steven’s story, which will be described in more detail and analyzed in terms of its semiotic functioning in the next section, was titled LEMON-ADE!! In it Steven told the story of being a “sickly” baby, whose mother had taken drugs during her pregnancy and who had had to remain hospitalized for 2 months “with tubes all over my body” until his foster mom took him home. He stated that he was a small baby who had remained small and recounted some of the health problems that he faced, including not being able to eat without vomiting. Steven’s upbeat voice narrated the story, while music by Brandy similarly sounded an upbeat note in the background. Next, Steven announced that he was now “doing good in school,” had lots of friends, and paid attention to his teachers, and he catalogued the things he liked to do, including cartwheels, flips, dancing, double Dutch, laughing, acting “goofy,” watching television, and eating Italian food, all illustrated with photos of the same. He further noted his personal attributes of having a “great smile” and being “funny.” The last part of Steven’s story was his statement that despite the bad things that had happened to him, he had still been “blessed” with “a wonderful mother and good heart.” He ended his narration with the reminder that “life will always bring you lemons, but you have to be strong enough to make the best of it and make lemonade out of it.” Then he thanked his mom, his sister, his friend Alyssa, and his after-school program.

Steven’s movie was subsequently shown in several community venues, to public acclaim and to the satisfaction of his foster mom. But the movie that Steven made was not completely the story that he had intended or wanted
to tell, and while it reified one version of himself—the happy-go-lucky friend, the grateful foster son, the well-adjusted kid who cheerfully made the best of a bad situation—as we will shortly demonstrate, it denied another and perhaps more authentic one from the author’s perspective.

The tensions around Steven’s story surfaced first through the coordinator of the after-school program, who overheard Steven dictating his story to his undergraduate learning partner, explaining that his birth mother had been addicted to drugs during her pregnancy, and so on. The coordinator, an African American man and a resident of the community, expressed concern that the type of story that Steven, also African American, was telling would play into stereotypes that outsiders had of this low-income, largely African American community, stereotypes about crime, drug addiction, and welfare abuse. Further, he worried that Steven’s tutor, who was White, and the other university students, who were predominantly White or Asian American, would similarly begin to generalize negatively about kids from the neighborhood and expect them to tell what he termed “ghetto stories,” negative depictions of lives that reproduced widely held but unfounded stereotypes. The coordinator thereafter arranged for Steven to work with a community volunteer in the program, an African American woman, rather than the university student. This community volunteer had views similar to those of the coordinator about the nature of an appropriate story and later communicated with Steven’s foster mom in order to find appropriate pictures to illustrate the story. The change of learning partners conflicted with the pedagogical and theoretical orientation of the after-school teacher, whose goal it was to create a safe after-school space where children could write about whatever they chose. As she put it, “Let them tell me what they want to write, and my role is to facilitate that process.”

Our field notes and artifacts from the period revealed another mounting conflict, this one within Steven. His conversation with his original learning partner included details, evaluations, and emotions that differed noticeably from the eventual script for his movie. Steven spoke with disappointment, for example, about his extended biological family, with its many cousins, that he could not visit or come to know, being instead stuck inside his urban apartment. He expressed the anger he felt toward his biological mother who, in his view, had decided that he “wasn’t her son” when she put him up for adoption. As Steven and his undergraduate partner discussed which details to include in his movie, Steven noted, “My mom said don’t write no negative stuff about my business.” And with this sentiment the community volunteer concurred. According to our field notes, whenever Steven began to speak negatively about his social world or his personal situation, such as
about his biological mom’s drug use or the fact that he was small in stature, the volunteer “would encourage him to look at where he is right now: a happy successful boy with a mother who loves him.” It was this volunteer, in fact, who provided the central metaphor and narrative progression for Steven’s story, making lemons out of lemonade, insisting that “you have to be thankful.”

Toward the end of the program, Steven stopped attending, never making that new digital story on double Dutch. He fell out of favor with Alyssa, who had a new circle of girlfriends, and he affiliated with a different peer group outside the program. As a young teenager, he fell behind in school, which eventually resulted in his relegation to special education classes. Three years later when we spoke with him again, Steven seemed to us an older, taller version of the friendly and outgoing 12-year-old we remembered: pleasant, talkative, very smart, and able to converse articulately on any number of topics, from popular culture to history to current events. We were surprised to hear that his digital story, Lemonade!!, had accompanied him throughout his adolescent years. His story had made the rounds from his old middle school to his new high school, from his godmother, to his probation officer, to certain of his friends. Kids often made fun of the story, he readily confided, laughing at him for being a “crack baby,” while adults praised his efforts, lauding his willingness to share his experiences and to look on the bright side.

Our final interview with Steven took place when he was 17 and a half and yearning for the day when he would turn 18 and thereby be authorized to live on his own. Steven exhibited on that occasion, as he did on others, a remarkable mathematical memory for time and events, being able to recall down to the month and the day the dramatic turning points in his life; he termed them “hell and drama”: entering and leaving a group home, pivotal confrontations, and the time that had elapsed since his sole conversation with a half-sibling. He watched with us his digital story again, reflecting on the boy represented in the movie and remembering the way the movie had become a passport of sorts that opened doors, but an identity card as well, almost committing him to the performance of a particular Self that was palatable to many adults and community members but apt to provoke ridicule from his peers. Finally, he mused over the content of his digital story, including its ending about making lemons out of lemonade. “Could you put that ending on a story now?” we asked. “I probably could,” Steven replied, “but you know I would be talking about the future, because with the present, you know, I’m still with lemons. Being able to escape from that, I would get the sweet taste of lemonade.”

To summarize, what we saw so vividly in our case study data was a tension between a young boy’s personal desires and authorial intentions and
those of the adults and caregivers around him. The point here is not simply to imply that the adults were wrong and the child was right necessarily; there is more to the story. The power dynamics that accorded to the composition process certainly shaped to a significant degree the self-presentation Steven authored, but power does not explain the role that the story seems to have played in Steven’s life after the fact. The text, and the version of Steven it vividly presented, conveyed implications and consequences of its own. It is to this text that we now turn in an attempt to reveal how the multimodal character of the text was pivotal in both fixing the self-presentational frame in which Steven was set and promoting its movement through his lifeworld.

Multimodal Text Analysis

In recent years, a number of scholars have formulated useful approaches to multimodal analysis. Norris (2004), for instance, offers a framework for analyzing multimodal interaction among people, texts, and environment within communication situations, inspired by conversation analysis methodology. As well, O’Halloran (2004) and colleagues have developed approaches to “multimodal discourse analysis” that draw substantially on work in systemic-functional linguistics, as originally conceived by Halliday (1994). For other notable contributions of practicable methods for understanding multimodal meaning making, see Baldry and Thibault (2006), Levine and Scollon (2004), and van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001).

For our part, we have devised a method of multimodal text analysis that was a direct outgrowth of our continuing involvement with a particular genre of multimodal text: digital stories. In Hull and Nelson (2005) we offered an apparatus for transcribing and examining digital stories in such a way that potential interactions of meaning among different modes at different points might be recognizable, and we took a very similar tack with the analysis of Steven’s Lemonade!! but with a few notable augmentations. See Figure 1 for an example of the transcription format.

As with the earlier version, the transcription format features several parallel, horizontal rows of boxes, with each row representing a category of constituent features (e.g., image, language, music) and each box representing an instance or token of each of these categorical types as it is deployed during a discreet segment of time. These time segments are defined by the shortest period of time that any one image appears on screen in the story. We refer to this minimal unit of analysis as a “mult-eme.” In the prior investigation (Hull & Nelson, 2005), the half-second segment is taken as the minimal unit of analysis in examining a digital poetry piece by a young-adult author.
called Randy. In the analysis of Steven’s story, the minimal unit is 2 seconds in duration. The rationale for choosing the visual/pictorial mode as the anchor or “leading mode” (Hull & Schulz, 2004) is suggested in the static, spatial organization that defines imagery itself, as explained above: The still photos and graphic images are the only elements in the story that are, in a manner of speaking, standing still. Therefore, they offer natural junctures at which to parse the composition across represented modes.

Another carryover from the previous version is the juxtaposition of interview excerpts and field notes with relevant sections of the transcription. Notice in the lower portion of Figure 1 an example excerpt from the second interview with Steven, wherein he reflects upon his emotional and mental state at the time of authoring his piece, making particular reference to the language elements of the story transcribed above. We found this feature of the transcription method to be of tremendous value in facilitating the complex process of analytic coding across different modes within the story and, crucially, across different data sources.
In order to more vividly and faithfully capture all aspects of the composition on a moment-to-moment basis, several new and helpful features were integrated within the transcription as well. Examining Figure 1 from top to bottom, first notice the small text boxes in the lower right-hand corner of some images. The “ZI” is shorthand for “zoom in,” indicating that the camera zooms in on a portion of the image while the image is displayed on screen. The small white dots superimposed on these same images show the foci or, to borrow from visual arts terminology, the vanishing points of the respective zoom actions. In the channel labeled “transition,” text boxes straddle the images above, where appropriate, indicating the presence of a transition effect, a visual segue bridging between sequential images. “H Bar WP T/B,” for example, elliptically denotes a horizontal wipe effect segmented into bars and progressing from the top of the screen to the bottom. In the music channel, the lyrics sung during this portion of the story are included, along with a brief explanation as to manner. Here we adapt from the language of musical tempo notation to give a sense of rhythm (not tempo, as such) in relative terms (cf. van Leeuwen, 1999). While the tempo of the song is practically invariant throughout (adagio or “at ease”), the delivery of the lyrics speeds up and slows down at different intervals. We employ notational terms such as andante (“walking pace”) and vivace (“lively”) only in order to descriptively capture something of the natures of these movements.

The segmentation of the music channel into three parts signifies three repetitions of the same sequential combination of lyrics and music, but with a slight variation in the lyrical content of the third: the articulation of “us.” We feel that these modifications are a certain improvement over the prior transcription scheme; however, admittedly, there are aspects of the composition—and of potential meaning—that it still does not capture, for example, prosodic aspects of Steven’s speech. In succeeding adaptations of this format, we hope to further enrich the diversity of simultaneously evident features that can be represented.

From this transcription, we developed the multimodal coding and analysis scheme included in Figure 2. Especially since the social mobility of the story over time and influences exerted on Steven’s story emerged as such salient factors in case study–related analysis, global categories of space, time, and representation of Self were felt to be necessary starting points in developing this framework and these analytic categories. The particular selection of patterns identified in the analysis to follow—for example, grammatical tense patterns—emerge out of this initial “start list” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of core analytic categories.
Referring to the schematic in Figure 2, notice that there are four horizontal bars, each representing an aspect of Steven’s story as it unfolds in time. From top to bottom, there is language, image, and metachannels, different shades of gray are employed simply to demarcate different elements of a pattern, as explained in the text of the article. In the music channel, however, shades of gray carry an additional significance: The progression from light to dark is intended to correspond to a quickening tempo (i.e., light gray = slower, dark gray = faster).

Referring to the schematic in Figure 2, notice that there are four horizontal bars, each representing an aspect of Steven’s story as it unfolds in time. From top to bottom, there is language, image, and music, and what we have termed the “meta-” category, which encompasses the thematic and pragmatic properties of the story. Notice, too, that the bars are segmented, some in ways that traverse modal boundaries and some that do not. In the analysis section to follow we make extensive reference to Figure 2, at which point a full explication of this diagram is forthcoming.

Text Description and Analysis

In the interest of clarity, we begin this section with a simple description of evident patterns of potential meaning within each represented mode and follow with a discussion of larger intermodal patterns and their implications. Again, please refer to Figure 2.
Language Channel

Eight seconds into the piece, the voice track begins. Upon close inspection of the content of the main part of the language channel (viz., the part book-ended by the title and credits), we saw it as segmentable into three pieces, each marked by a salient shift in grammatical form. The first roughly 1 minute is largely characterized by past-tense verb forms (identified below in brackets), a natural artifact of Steven relating events of his earlier life:

When I [was born] I was sickly. When my momma [was] pregnant with me she [was taking] drugs. After my biological mom [had] me, she [left] me at the hospital. I [was] in the hospital for two months with tubes all over my body. My foster mom, my third cousin, [got] me out of the hospital. I [was] a small baby, just like I am now, except I’m not a baby. My mom said I [used to throw up] every time I [ate]. All my life I [have been taking] vitamins. They keep me alive. I [used to be] hyper when I was younger, and I probably still am.

At the end of the foregoing passage, Steven makes the rhetorical transition to present time: “I probably still am.” Accordingly, the following 1 minute is mainly characterized by timeless or habitual present forms. A notable exception, addressed later, is the 5-second segment underlined below, which describes the frightening past experience of being stuck in an elevator:

Now I [live] with my mamma, Ms. Jones, in Citytown on Fourth Street. I [live] on the eleventh floor. I got stuck in the elevator for forty-five minutes when I was three years old. I was scared! Now, I [am doing] good in school, I [have] friends, I [listen] to my teachers and I [make] good grades. The things I [like] to do are cartwheels and flips. I [like] to dance. I [love] to play double-dutch so much that Alyssa’s arms [get] worn out when I jump. I also [like] to laugh, I [am] goofy, and I [am] so funny that I [crack] up Alyssa so much that she [can’t stop] laughing! I [have] a great smile. I [like] to eat a lot of Italian food and I [like] to watch TV.

The third spoken section features a complexly impacted series of clauses, ending in a periphrastic modal construction of deontic import (underlined below). The pragmatic significance of this section is to express appreciation and relate a take-away moral to the audience:

The most important thing I will always remember is that no matter what bad things have happened in my life, God still blessed me with a wonderful mother and a good heart. If there is one thing I want everyone to understand is life will always bring you lemons, but you have to be strong enough to make the best of it and make lemonade out of it.
In the final segment, the credits, Steven expresses appreciation to the important people in his life, most especially his mother, Mrs. Jones:

I would like to thank my mom for being here for me, for putting clothes on my back, for putting a roof over my head, for loving me, for being here for me while my other mom isn’t, and I would like to thank Alyssa and everyone from DUSTY and my sister Kayla.

**Image Channel**

In the image channel, the story opens with the written title. The expression “LEMONADE!!” appears in bold, royal-blue capital letters against a stark, white background. The font is recognizable as Times New Roman, if rendered a bit squat. The story itself begins with a photographic image of Steven as a small baby, lying on a polka-dotted blanket and staring upward. Immediately subsequent is a close-up of crack cocaine paraphernalia: improvised tinfoil pipes, an empty vial, a disposable lighter, a scattering of crack. The camera’s eye trains and zooms in on a cluster of crystalline rocks in the lower portion of the frame. The following 50 seconds of video consist mainly of still images of Steven himself—as a baby swaddled in the powder-blue cloth of hospital garments, in the arms of Mrs. Jones, as a smiling preteen—interspersed with photos of friends, his school, and a number of stock images (accessed on Google image search) such as of the hospital building in which he was born, a sickly infant hooked up to various tubes, a graphic illustration of three vitamin bottles, a photograph of pizza. Straddling these images is an assortment of visual transitions (e.g., wipes, spin-aways, page peels), and each image features a slow zoom-in effect.

For the first 2 minutes of the piece, the proportion of images of Steven himself to the total number of images is approximately two thirds (a ratio of 18:28 or 64%). Recalling the grammatical cleft mentioned above between Minutes 1 and 2, we notice that this proportion is roughly consistent within these subsections as well (Minute 1, 8:13 or 62%; Minute 2, 10:15 or 67%). However, interestingly, in the 25-second coda that follows, the “moral-of-the-story” section described above, none of the images represented (a photo of sunbeams streaming through clouds; a photo of Mrs. Jones sitting at home; a close-up of lemons hanging on a tree; and a photo of an ice-filled glass and pitcher of lemonade, repeated once) depicts Steven himself.

The visual design of the credits mirrors the title: blue Times New Roman script centered on a white field.
Music Channel

The music channel features the 2002 R & B hit “What About Us?” by Brandy. The song has a tight looplike rhythm, and Steven has not manipulated it at all, save for ending the song at the close of his piece, thereby truncating it by 90 seconds. At the beginning of “What About Us?” is a celebratory, siren-like “Wooo!” signaling the start of the song and of Steven’s story; he begins to speak after this point. There is a discomfiting irony to the juxtaposition of this exultant whoop with the words that follow: Steven, in an almost enthusiastic tone, admits, “When I was born I was sickly. When my momma was pregnant with me she was taking drugs.” This irony perhaps also extends to the song lyrics, which relate the feelings of an angry, betrayed woman at the end of a romantic relationship, as evidenced by the following stanza:

I thought you said you were different
Was that what I heard you say?
Said that you’d love only me
Thought that you’d be all I need (what?)
What happened to promises?
Said that you were a better man
Your words have no way with me
Cause you’re counterfeit, I see

The delivery of these lyrics, as regards speed and force, is analogized visually in Figure 2. There are several rhythmic movements in the piece, and the relative speed and force of the lyrics delivered in each section is represented in the figure in terms of intensity of shade, where darker shading corresponds to faster, more forceful delivery. These movements may also be described thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interval</th>
<th>Description of Movement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0:50</td>
<td>Allegretto to allegro (minor increase)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:14</td>
<td>Allegro to adagio (marked decrease)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:24</td>
<td>Adagio to allegretto (marked increase)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:05</td>
<td>Allegretto to allegro (minor increase)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:23</td>
<td>Allegro to adagio (marked decrease)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:35</td>
<td>Adagio to vivace (major increase)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Meta-Channel

What we have termed the meta-channel categorically describes the thematic content and discernable pragmatic import of the different parts of
Steven’s story. Following the title, Steven tells of the rejection and illnesses he had endured and overcome in the early part of his life, corresponding to the use of the past tense. Just before the 1-minute mark, there is an evident shift in grammar again, as well as in theme. At this point, in an optimistic turn, Steven inventories his personal successes, connections, and preferences. Then, preceding the end credits, Steven delivers a note of appreciation and his take-away point: in essence, the importance of being grateful and positive.

At this point we should explain that not all of the features of the foregoing analysis were treated in equal depth, nor did these all factor in obvious or important ways into the findings hereafter discussed. However, in producing these fine-grained transcriptions and pursuing the explication of patterns described above, we were able to see, in ways albeit limited but also fascinating, how the diverse facets of a text—and, vitally, of its context—align to forcefully suggest potential meanings.

Findings

Thus far, we have detailed relevant aspects of Steven’s life experiences and of the process by which these experiences found form in a multimedia product. We have also examined the product itself, with an eye to interactions of potential meaning among its constituent parts. Here, we twine these threads together with the aim of accounting in some way for the remarkable reciprocal influence exhibited over time between Steven and his digital self-presentation. Again, in particular, we characterize this relationship in terms of two forces: fixity and fluidity.

Fixity

Careful investigation of the ways these modal channels in Lemonade!! align with one another and with Steven’s authorial intentions and life experiences may shed light on the nature, function, and implications of what we are calling “multimodal chronotopes,” which again are understood herein as fixed spatiotemporal conjunctions of meaning.

Expectedly, Steven, as an erstwhile 12-year-old, speaks in his story with the voice of a 12-year-old. Still, in each interview, upon re-viewing his story, the 17-year-old Steven invariably expressed concern over the sound of his immature voice, once saying “at least now my voice has a little bass to it.” Consider as well that the array of images in the story vividly portray
the history, physical characteristics, and predilections of a 12-year-old Steven, or rather a particular selection of these. In the music channel, the Brandy song anchors Steven’s multimedia portrait in 2002 and associates Steven directly with a female artist in the R & B genre. Thematically, Steven presents himself in terms of the following explicit (what he actually says) and implicit (what can be reasonably inferred) descriptors:

Explicit: hyper, sick, scared, goofy, loved, funny, having a great smile, and a lover of dance, double Dutch, TV, and Italian food
Implicit: obedient, positive, hard working, active, sensitive, grateful

Seemingly, based on the very limited grouping of self-signifiers he includes, the composite picture that Steven presents, especially vis-à-vis his teenage male peers, is of a frail and obedient child. And the aforementioned 5-second segment in which Steven describes being trapped in an elevator and afraid, like a brief rupture in an otherwise optimistic sequence, makes these kinds of characteristics, this sort of portrayal, all the more salient and cogent.

All of these elements of potential meaning, codeployed as they are, contextualize one another and fix, reify—“add flesh to,” in Bakhtin’s (1981, p. 250) phrase—a self-presentation of a narrow interpretation of Steven at a fixed time and place in his life. To be sure, one can explain oneself only in terms of a relatively very few modifiers and qualities given the semiotic and practical constraints of the hybrid medium of the digital story. In a 3-minute span, one can only speak one word at a time, show a mere three dozen or so images, incorporate a favorite song or two. A presentation of Self, in this format at least, is ineluctably partial and incomplete, however semiotically “full” (cf. Kress, 2003), vivid, enduring, and quite often public as well.

Still further, the choices Steven made as to which features would occupy the precious little real estate of his story were not even all his own. As mentioned above, the buoyant, rose-colored cast to the story—that is, making lemonade out of lemons—was not part of Steven’s original conception or design. He was urged to put a brave face on his life by adults, and he reluctantly acquiesced. Remarkably, even in the final version of Steven’s piece, there is evidence of the lack of authenticity of this ending, the inorganic relation of it to the foregoing original portion.

Referring back to Figure 2, we see that even on the textual level, in the language and especially the imagery of the composition, there are indicators that the coda supplied at the end is not consonant with the preceding sections. This is obviously signaled by a grammatical rupture, the shift
away from present-tense forms, as well as by a conspicuous absence of visual representations of Steven in this last bit. As Steven himself ultimately explained, he only wanted to tell a “then and now” story of his life. In pressuring Steven to change his story idea, the community volunteer not only put a brave face on his self-presentation, she fostered an assumed but artificial causal relation between the first two parts: the trials of his past and the relative peace and happiness of the present. The affect of this change was to impute a false intention—living happily through thinking positively—where there was none.

Yet truth, or a lack of it, impedes not at all the wholeness, the perceived or “virtual” truth, of the multimodal chronotope. The “whole” story is replaced by an abundance of potential meaning, a saturation of the senses, offering not truth, but a semblance of it, a vividly rendered alternative to it. Still, recalling Goffman (1959), we see and understand that this version of Steven’s Self, caricature though it may have been, was his own, a digital doppelgänger of sorts for which he has been held to account.

Fluidity

Again, upon completion, Steven’s story grew legs, so to speak, perhaps in part because the movie, to which the digital story bears a strong physical and functional resemblance, is a genre which, by convention, is supposed to be shown. Again, Steven’s Lemonade!! was viewed and/or discussed by family members, peers, and authority figures. And it might be said that the story stuck with him for better and for worse. In the ensuing year or so, the story earned him a reputation for childishness and weakness, for example, among his middle school peers, while it evoked innocence, pathos, and positivity in the majority of adults. What is striking, though, is not only the fluidity of movement and meaning—that the story played differently to different crowds—but also that the fixity, clarity, and cogency of the particular multimodal Self he presented seemed to preclude interpretation of the story on the part of his audiences, leaving only evaluations of Steven himself to be made. The multimodal, chronotopic self-presentation is no more open to interpretation than other forms of information are thought to be. In this sense, too, the above assertion of Bakhtin seems to hold.

In sum, it is our supposition that the source of potential power of a multimedia self-presentation, rooted in the multiplicative interactions of meaning among copresented modes, can, by virtue of this same semiotic fullness, fix representations of identity in potent and sometimes narrow and unwanted ways, particularly in cases like Steven’s, where an author lacks
full control of the means of production and distribution. A question might be raised, however, about whether digital, multimodal forms of composition are essentially different from what has gone before. In other words, could the same impacts be felt and conclusions be drawn if Steven’s piece had been a poem or essay published in a local newspaper? We believe that there is an important difference, as we hope we have demonstrated. The difference between electronically enabled multimodal texts like digital stories and their less multimodal counterparts resides in the multiple layers of semiotic fullness that masquerade as fact in the multimedia text coupled with the easy transportability and public orientation of the highly visual, filmic product. So in detailing Steven’s story, both its digital and “extradigital” versions, a primary concern has been to make apparent the necessity and potentials of combining detailed analysis of new media texts themselves with careful ethnographic investigation of the intentions, interactions, and environments that foster these texts and promote their circulation in particular ways.

Conclusions

First, we associate new media with youth agency and with some good reason, since these make available potent forms of communication until recently reserved for the elite, and, complementarily, kids quite naturally gravitate toward them. However, it is a mistake to naively assume that new media bestow the power to communicate freely, without constraints, for anyone, but especially of course for kids. Buckingham (2003), for instance, argues that the new range of choices made available by digital technology does not necessarily make the act of constructing an image any more conscious or deliberate.

. . . . Unless these basic questions about selection and manipulation are built into the process, and made the focus of conscious reflection, these new choices may well become merely an excuse for arbitrary experimentation. (p. 186)

While Buckingham’s point is very well taken, Steven’s example clearly illustrates that extrinsic forces like time, space, and power—Kantian in scope—also bear upon agency and authorial choices, conscious and deliberate though those choices may be.

Alternative spaces for learning, like after-school programs and community centers, are sometimes viewed as freer, less constraining, offering empowering alternatives to traditional participant structures. And all of this can be true. But we were surprised at the tensions, cross-purposes, and different points of view that characterized our alternative space. We are not
arguing that one point of view was right—surely, young people need to come to understand the consequences that can attend their representations of Self and community (as do we all), and they surely also need some freedom to write about what they want. Managing these tensions productively for the sake of children and youth is key.

Last, again, Appadurai (1996) has alerted us to the way images and texts migrate globally, and that is of course true, but this study alerts us to how they travel locally, which may have far-reaching consequences for youth. We believe it reasonable to assert, in general, that kids’ writings have never been as visible as they now are; the digital and multimodal characteristics of new media texts make the stories that kids have to tell significantly more salient, showable, memorable, and transportable. We pay attention to those texts, and now we need to pay equal attention, as educators and researchers, to the implications of the circulation of those texts, especially when they may “fix” kids with certain identities.

Ernst Gombrich (1972), in a discussion of portraiture in art, explains that “we tend to project life and expression onto the arrested image and supplement from our own experience what is not actually present.” We instinctively try to discern “the expression that implies all others” (Gombrich, 1972, p. 17). Counterinstinctual though it may be, then, perhaps a fundamental pillar of new media literacy should be to develop the habit of seeing another’s self-presentation not as the multimedia expression that implies all others, but rather as what it is, a singular, chronotopic window onto an infinitely broader, richer, and more nuanced personal portrait.

Notes

1. “Steven” and all other personal and location names mentioned herein are pseudonyms.
2. Blumer (1969), drawing on the work of G. H. Mead and others, describes symbolic interactionism as resting on “three simple premises”: that (a) “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that they have for them”; (b) “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows”; and (c) “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (p. 2).
3. Naturally, “ZO” would be used for “zoom out,” but there are no such instances in Steven’s piece.
4. We understand and acknowledge the difficulty in referring to the spoken language element of the story as “language,” given that song lyrics and a number of written language elements, such as titles and credits, are also represented. We use the term in this way simply as an unambiguous label.
5. We coin the term extradigital to signify aspects of Steven’s life story that are not contained in his digital story itself. We do not pretend, however, that these details complete the whole or actual story of his life. It is a fuller, more balanced picture we present, we hope, but still an unavoidably partial one.
References


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