EMERGING VOICES:  
Upvoting the Exordium: Literacy Practices of the Digital Interface

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The rise of the digital landscape has arguably made self-motivated writing more prominent than ever before, thanks in large part to the proliferation of digital participatory spaces. Defined by James Gee as “a place or set of places where people affiliate with others based primarily on shared activities, interests, and goals,” digital participation sites offer a wide range of opportunities for deploying both digital and alphabetic literacy skills, and have proven incredibly successful in creating the literacy engagement that frequently proves elusive in composition instruction. Over the past fifteen years, a richly interdisciplinary conversation has developed concerning the nature and effects of participation in these spaces. This research suggests that the literacy opportunities these spaces offer emphasize “the public nature of writing” (Sabatino 42), with users rapidly delivering and receiving feedback through digitally produced and mediated text. This shifts the purpose of literate activity “from individual expression to community involvement,” facilitating practices that emphasize the values of digital literacy as well as traditional (Jenkins et al. xiii). Interactions within participatory spaces “push [users’] thinking and create an audience for [their] work,” thus encouraging them to engage in that work more regularly (Squire 14). Since most students are active in digital participation spaces at some point in their lives (Jenkins et al.), this makes them a rich site of inquiry for theorizing literacy engagement, especially in relation to students’ existing everyday literacy activity and practices.¹

But while this existing research has revealed much about how the content and communities of these spaces create engagement, it hasn’t done much to explore how a site’s design and structure—its interface—influences participation. By “interface,”

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I refer to the visual and digital tools available to the writer (or reader) for interaction within a given site.2

Since most of us cannot reach right in and work with the computer languages in which the programs we use are written, we need interfaces to bridge the gap (Wardrup-Fruin 3). But beyond this most practical function, interfaces can do a great deal to enhance a user’s experience: they expand (often greatly) the range of practices available for communicating with others (Brooke); they can make an otherwise functional experience into a pleasurable one (Pepper); and they can offer insights into the digital cultures they represent that are beyond the scope of textual modes (Manovich).

Since every experience within digital participation sites is mediated by the site’s interface, the design of that interface is arguably as essential to user participation as the contents of the site itself. Teena Carnegie compares the role of the digital interface to that of the traditional rhetorical exordium: its purpose is to make the audience “well-disposed, attentive, and receptive.” An interface-exordium succeeds, she says, by signaling its potential for interactivity in a manner that creates a sense of empowerment in its desired users (171). In other words, its job is to make users feel that their individual goals and their options for participation are in harmony. This directly mirrors some of the most essential goals of the composition classroom, suggesting that translating this self-motivated participation into an academic context may start with applying the lessons of digital interface.

The goal of this article is to highlight those lessons by examining the connections between interface and literacy engagement in digital participation spaces. I begin by briefly situating this article in the existing conversation concerning the rhetorical nature of digital interface. Then, using data from a study of college students’ online reading and writing, I highlight patterns in how students discuss interface in relation to their experiences in participatory sites and interpret these patterns through the lens of digital interface theory. In particular, I argue that interface increases writing activity by easing the transition from consumption to production—from first-time visitor to regular reader, from regular reader to registered member, and so on. By offering interactive tools and practices through which students can progress toward written participation at their own pace, interfaces in digital participation spaces are able to successfully engage a wide range of potential users. I close by discussing the implications of these findings for composition instruction and what it might look like to apply the strategies of interface’s digital exordium within the classroom setting.

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**THE RHETORICAL INTERFACE AND USER EXPERIENCE**

Interface is a powerful part of the digital writing experience, as well as digital literacy more broadly. In his discussion of “cool” and the interface, Mark Pepper highlights
the very active role interface plays in dictating what knowledge and conversations we do or don’t see. With so much content out there, he says, *something* needs to act as a filter if we are to extract anything useful; the style of the interface, he says, acts as a powerful first-line tool in the competition for human attention. “People are paying attention to style,” he reminds us, “and so the call to use it effectively is louder than ever” (2014). Some authors, such as Donald Norman and Alison Head, have argued that to give the best user experience, interfaces should call as little attention to their role as possible; the more invisible the interface, these arguments contend, the less there is standing in the way of the users’ purpose. But the influence of Selfe and Selfe’s “Politics of Interface” and other works focused on interface’s mediating effects has ultimately shifted the conversation toward the opposite conclusion: we need to see the interface so that we can better interrogate its effects on us. As interfaces weave themselves deeper and deeper into our daily lives, it’s increasingly easy to lose sight of the influence they inevitably and inherently retain; the “blinding seduction of the wondrous,” as Lori Emerson puts it, makes “interfaces themselves, and therefore their constraints . . . ever more difficult to perceive” (x).

The importance of keeping interface situated in a larger perspective is on the radar in design studies as well, as reflected in emerging, more contextualized evaluation criteria for assessing interface design. Traditionally, the primary assessment criteria for user interfaces was usability—their effectiveness, efficiency, and overall ease of use. However, as Barbara Mirel points out, that usability only accounts for users’ experiences within a static baseline context—which is not, in fact, representative of user experiences overall. As a result, usability-focused design, by nature, leads to a decontextualization of interface on the part of its designers. In reality, says Mirel, interfaces are used in hectic situations as well as ideal ones; what passes as usable in the latter will often fall apart in the former. As such, she proposes a second evaluation category: usefulness. Interfaces designed for usefulness are effective for “dynamic work that cannot fit into the formalisms of usual software engineering” as well (34). But usefulness doesn’t account for interface’s socially situated nature. And as it turns out, social affordances can be the key on which an entire user experience turns: recent research by Huatong Sun shows that users will ignore ease of use entirely if the social affordances of an interface are compelling enough (144). This idea of “compelling” rounds out the interface design trifecta—“something inherent in the [interface] that *compels* certain social interactions” (Sun 76). These concepts, in addition to establishing interface’s situated nature from a design perspective, prove helpful for unpacking some of the student interface experiences in the analysis here, particularly in relation to interface’s role in encouraging (or discouraging) literacy activity.

In their collaborative presentation of three digital ethnography projects, Jen Scott Curwood, Alecia Magnifico and Jayne Lammers cite mutual interest between writer and audience in a site’s content as the strongest and most common motivation
for participating in online communities, a view that’s largely representative of the conversation as a whole. But many of these studies also provide implicit arguments that this is not the only factor that matters. Rik Hunter’s study of the WOWWiki records 1,500 active users out of a registered 2.2 million. Jayne Lammers’s ethnography of Sims fanfiction site The Hangout includes a graph indicating that of the site’s 12,000+ registered members, fewer than 3,750 have ever made a post—leaving a silent population of nearly 9,000. And a study of radical Jihadist forums found that only 13 percent of registered accounts had even one post in their history, with only 5 percent posting five times or more (Awan). Even assuming an attrition rate of roughly 60 percent, that’s still nearly a million WOWWiki users, 3,600 Sims fan fiction aficionados, and 361 radical Muslims who were motivated enough to register accounts in these spaces but who, for some reason, never made the jump to written participation. For more than half of the users in these spaces, something happens between signing up and submitting a post to open a gap between interest and participation.

For those of us in composition, this isn’t such a surprise; if creating self-motivated writing was as easy as letting students write about their interests, whole swaths of our discipline’s scholarship wouldn’t exist. But we know that some balance of forces has made such writing not only common but characteristic of digital participation. And as a rhetorical mediator of every digital experience, interface is a logical starting point for examining what’s different about these contexts, what lets them turn interests of all strengths and sizes into writing activity. As such, my goal in the rest of this article is to trace that relationship between interface and participation through students’ own accounts of their digital activity. Treating interface as one aspect within a larger picture, rather than interrogating its effects directly, allows me to not only explore interface’s effect on participation, but also to locate the places where that effect is strongest. Ultimately I argue that interface acts most strongly at moments of transition from one level or form of participation to the next—from casual drop-in to regular visitor and from regular visitor to active contributor.

**Looking Into Interface**

The data I present here is taken from a broader study of college students’ online reading and writing. The study’s objective was to collect firsthand data about students’ own perceptions of and motivations for reading and writing in digital contexts. Half of the thirty participating students attended a local two-year college; the other half were enrolled at a large research university in the same town. The two groups were recruited via a combination of email solicitation and classroom visits, both targeted at lower- or mid-level courses with a central writing component. This targeting was a function of my original hypothesis that comparing classroom writing experiences to those of writing online would help to highlight the unique qualities of the latter.
This line of inquiry ultimately proved too unproductive for my research goals and was eventually revised out of the interview protocol. However, since the courses in which I recruited were all part of high-enrollment general education programs (and thus reflect no inherent affinity for writing or digital activity), this recruitment ultimately has little significance in the makeup of the eventual participant pool. In fact, my recruitment materials emphasized that I was not looking for especially active or advanced online writers: “[W]hether you feel you do a lot of writing online, or a little, or none at all, you can still help me with this research.”

Though I collected only demographic information related to their enrollment, through their interviews this group of students revealed themselves to span a wide range of ages, backgrounds, and educational narratives. Approximately two-thirds were “traditional” college students, meaning they were on their first enrollment and between 18 and 23 years old. The remaining students fell between 25 and 32; two of the students in this group had been previously enrolled, with a gap of two years or more before beginning their current enrollment. Since I don’t have complete data about these factors, I cannot draw any specific conclusions about this diversity relative to my other findings—but readers should keep in mind that the data presented here represents a particularly diverse group of students. I did see some differences between traditional and nontraditional groups, and (to a much smaller extent) the two-year and four-year groups. But none of those differences extended to the questions considered here—in matters of interface, no demographic trends were visible.

To understand how students perceived their literacy experiences online and the motivations behind them, I asked them to describe their routines and habits for engaging in casual online activity. (I defined “casual,” when asked, as activity unrelated to school or work, and driven by their own interests/impulses rather than an externally imposed task.) Students responded to interview questions with general accounts of their online behavior, as well as more specific ones about experiences with a particular space. They spoke about experiences interacting through writing with people they knew socially and with strangers and described their motivations for (or sometimes against) engaging in such writing, about the routines and practices they use to guide their online reading, and about the role of their personal interests in guiding their online activity. As a data collection tool, the interview was an excellent match for the goals of this study, as it allows the researcher to “[elicit] each participant’s interpretation of his or her experience” (Charmaz 25). Using a semi-structured format for these interviews let both interviewer and interviewee adapt their contributions to “the emerging worldview of the respondent” (Merriam 90), allowing students to best showcase their oldest and most personal area of expertise—their own lived experience.

Grounded theory’s reliance on strategies for translating the “language, meanings and perspectives” of participants into a theory that “understand[s] participants’
views and actions from their perspectives” (Charmaz 47) makes it a natural fit for the goals of my project. Following grounded theory’s strategy of “emergence,” my initial coding was guided by the content of the interviews; whenever possible, codes employed gerunds to keep focus on data as elements of extended actions/processes rather than static topics—responding to original content, arriving at a new site, visually evaluating infrastructure. Assisted by extensive memo writing, another grounded theory standby, I identified patterns in this initial coding. These patterns became the basis for the two subsequent coding phases, as well as several modifications to the interview protocol. In this way, analysis progressed from initial to refined codes, from raw data into theories of digital participation.

This analysis suggests that it’s in decisions about engagement where interface exerts its strongest and most visible influence. At moments of decision along the process toward becoming an active member of a participatory space, interface emerges as a factor that can tip students either way—toward the active digital engagement these spaces offer or away from it. My discussion of these findings reflects an effort to understand this extended influence as one of multiple factors—to add to, rather than take issue with, existing theories about this participatory activity. Since it’s that activity that catches our eye as digital literacy scholars and has made these spaces the focus of so much attention, understanding the role of interface in initiating and developing that activity is therefore an integral part of understanding how digital literacy functions in these spaces as a whole.

Of the thirty students I interviewed, twenty-three (77 percent) brought up interface at least once as a factor in their accounts of online reading or writing; within this group, nineteen students (82 percent) mentioned it in the context of participatory spaces. As I mentioned, the interview protocol did not include any direct questions about interface: the discussions of interface were initiated by the students themselves (though sometimes deepened or clarified through follow-up questions). This makes the frequency with which interface shows up in the interviews quite suggestive, even with the relatively small sample size. And rather than relating ways in which interfaces shaped what they did, students were more likely to talk about interfaces in terms of whether they did something; their responses showed interface coming to the fore in moments of decision.

Most often, this influence was effected through specific individual elements of the interfaces—the steps and system of registration, for example, or a visual hierarchy for displaying content. I refer to these specific features of interfaces as “affordances.” Adapted from James Gibson’s ecological philosophy, the term has proven a useful (if sometimes contentious) frame for describing the “features and functionalities” of interactive artifacts in technology and new media scholarship (Sun 73). The concept is rooted in the view that a tool’s interactive potential is by nature socially situated (Swarts 150), making it particularly useful for analyzing the link between interface
design and literacy activity. In the context of the following discussion, an affordance is the potential interaction offered to users by a tool or feature of a site’s interface. Such a view follows Klaus Bærentsen and Johan Trettvik’s treatment of the concept as merging an object’s properties with its potential for use by a situated user (59) and helps me reflect the ties between the elements of an interface and students’ individual and inherently contextualized perceptions of their value.

Finally, before I dive into the specifics of these affordances and their influence, a quick note about the limits of these interviews. It is important to remember that the dual sites in which the study was conducted make generalizing about participant characteristics beyond their identity as currently enrolled college students particularly difficult, if not impossible. I also acknowledge that the decision to privilege participant perceptions as a form of data means results are inherently based on self-reporting and are therefore subject to the limitations and questions such reporting brings. However, I maintain that students’ perceptions of their own activity are an important and effective means of adding to our understanding of digital participatory cultures. Approaching this subject through students’ own perceptions makes what has so far been largely invisible visible and does so by first showing the need for that unveiling.

**Entry Affordances**

Interfaces begin influencing decisions about engagement with a site even before its content does. Though not the most frequently mentioned, visual first impressions based on interface were a heavily weighted factor in early decisions about participatory spaces. Becoming an active contributor in a participatory space is a multistep process, and these first-glance perceptions are a significant factor in the first stage of that process: becoming a regular visitor. In some cases, this takes a positive form for students—their initial perception of an interface draws them into a site, enhancing their motivation to return (and, in some cases, to write). But negative experiences carry even more weight. I didn’t hear a single story about being turned off to a site by the quality of its content—what students remember most vividly about participatory spaces they no longer visit is how they looked. If an interface makes a bad impression, what it presents hardly seems to matter.

Leah’s “first impression” experiences nicely encapsulate these overall patterns. While looking for a place to read about and discuss LGBT issues, Leah came across the site AfterEllen but stopped returning after only a few visits. “It didn’t look as nice,” she told me when I asked her why. “It didn’t look as nice,” she told me when I asked her why. “It was just kind of boring—blocky and not very inviting.” She had an even more vehement reaction to online community and social news site Reddit, which includes many LGBT-related forums; Leah said she visited once and had no interest in after that. “It’s not that I can’t figure it [Reddit] out,” she told me. “It’s that I don’t want to because I look at it and it’s so
boring.” Eventually Leah found Autostraddle, a site she liked enough to become a regular participant. Here, by contrast, “[T]here’s color, and it looks modern and cool . . . it makes you want to interact with it.” This inviting impression on the part of Autostraddle’s interface is a key part of why Leah is so active there; without these qualities, she concluded, “I don’t think I’d be as inclined to use it.”

This is typical of what I heard across my interviews about interface first impressions. Descriptions of the interfaces’ strengths or weaknesses were never very specific—hence my tagging of them as “impressions.” Students didn’t talk about the presence or absence of particular tools or functions (or if so, only in passing). Instead, they were characterized by visually coded judgments: sites “looked” complicated, boring, interesting, etc. When these statements yielded an overall negative impression, students took their loyalty elsewhere. When it was positive or neutral, they stayed. It’s beyond the scope of my data to speculate too much about how this influence compares to the impression made by a quick glance at a site’s contents. But it seems clear that interface’s appeal to audience is a definite factor in whether a site succeeds or fails at drawing visitors further in and, thus, closer to written participation.

Interface’s influence is highly visible in the second stage of the participatory activity process as well: moving from regular visitor to registered member. About a third of the students I spoke to mentioned at least one instance in which they were deterred from writing by the requirements associated with doing so—registration steps, login screens, etc. Unlike visual impressions, students didn’t perceive these requirements as obstacles to becoming regular visitors; being a registered member had little or no perceptible effect on experiences that were limited to consumption alone. When asked to explain their reasons for this limited activity, however, about half of students pointed to these entry features, in some shape or form, as a deterring force. I refer to this set of conditions as entry affordances—features that offer users entry into a space, as well as, by extension, the abilities and interactive privileges associated with that entry.

Let’s look more closely at how this looks on Reddit, the site Leah found so off-putting—but which is actually quite popular among both the students I spoke with and Internet users as whole. Composed of a constantly growing array of “subreddits” devoted to particular topics, Reddit owes much of this popularity to the unusually large range of features it offers users for interacting with these spaces and their content. Members can create a highly customized and community-curated newsfeed, or “front page,” by seeking out and subscribing to subreddits whose practices and interests match their own. Where nonmembers see a “default” front page drawn from an administrator-curated list of subreddits, a registered user sees content from communities and subject areas they’ve chosen themselves. They can also submit content of their own, comment and vote on existing submissions, and are free to create and moderate subreddits of their own. Downloading the Reddit Enhancement
Suite, an official set of browser plug-ins developed by the site’s administrators, opens up even more customization options, such as more options for saving content and the ability to assign unique descriptive “tags” to other users. But these features are only available to registered members: you have to make an account, and then use it to sign in. The steps of registration and sign-in are Reddit’s entry affordances; the resulting abilities are what that entry affords through them.

That first step, registering for a site-specific account, was the entry affordance students brought up most, and almost always as a deterrent from further participation. Students already have so many accounts in so many places that the prospect of creating and remembering one more can overpower whatever prospect of participation it offers—one student expressed it as “a lot of memorization for no payoff.” Brad’s experience using the news aggregation site digg is representative of these responses. Unlike Reddit, digg’s content is editorially driven, its selection and display controlled primarily its administrators; however, systems for user submissions and voting give members some potential influence. Despite listing the site as his second-most visited and voicing an engaged and loyal relationship with the site and its content, Brad has never had a digg account. When I expressed surprise at this and asked why, Brad replied, “I have a lot of accounts, a lot of different passwords to remember. It’s not so much that as just I . . . don’t, I’m not very active in Internet discussions. And since I’m not that active in [them] anyways, it just never seemed worth it.” Coming from a casual or occasional user of the site, this might not seem at all unusual. But Brad, like many students deterred by entry affordances, is clearly invested in the site, at one point identifying (albeit jokingly) as “digg for life” despite the site’s drop in popularity. For students like Brad, the entry affordance of yet another registered account is too high; engagement with the site is correspondingly limited to being a loyal but nonparticipating visitor. To put it in design terms, students find registration usable—it’s easy to figure out and its gets the job done—but often not useful in the context of a given experience to overcome even that low barrier. It’s only when the situation renders the affordances of registration compelling (or, as I discuss below, offers affordances that are compelling enough of their own accord) that they’re willing to pass through.

However, usability featured much more prominently when students discussed the technological context of their activity. Interfaces that make a good impression on a laptop screen don’t always translate well to a smartphone, and all but the briefest and most informal writing becomes more difficult on a mobile device. Brad visits Reddit just as frequently on his phone as on his computer but told me he only comments when he has a full keyboard; April, Willow, and Ella voiced similar sentiments. But a mobile context didn’t always increase entry barriers. Greg, who does a lot of reading and writing in support of his social justice organization, says he prefers sharing and discussing articles via Facebook because its app sends replies directly to his phone.
and makes it easy to keep up with the conversation throughout the day. Two other students also mentioned Facebook’s messaging app as a factor in their writing within the full site as well. This suggests that the usefulness of these apps, rather than their ability to offer any particularly compelling affordances, is what motivates students’ decisions to use them. This shift underscores that digital interfaces are one force among many in shaping students’ online writing, any one of which has the potential to alter its impact in a given situation. The “tectonic change” digital technologies have brought to writing (Yancey 298) has not changed its nature as a densely structured act; the “dynamic interlocking systems” of Marilyn Cooper’s writing ecology model have, as the interplay between situated interface and literacy activity show, only become more numerous and more dynamic.

Regardless of device preference, most students found at least one site in which they were motivated to overcome these entry barriers, however. Of the fifteen students who shared information about that motivation, seven attributed it to a specific writing opportunity—they had something particular they wanted to contribute, and this pushed them to make an account. In all seven cases, students had already been visiting the site regularly for some time—anywhere from a few weeks to over a year. Registration in participatory sites typically confers benefits beyond just the ability to contribute content—some of which, as I discuss, substantially enhance users’ ability to interact with a site. For these students, entry affordances outweighed those benefits, preventing them from engaging fully not only as contributors of content but as consumers of it as well. Without the obstacle of those affordances, it’s possible they might have become contributors earlier on—rather than only when they encountered an exceptionally attractive opportunity.

This isn’t purely speculation: it’s supported by the other half of the registration narratives. Of these eight students, seven made accounts a few weeks or months prior before making their initial post, motivated by a desire to customize their interface experience or vote on content. These students weren’t thinking about writing when they signed up. But having that sign-up process behind them made writing a more accessible proposition, since their desire to write no longer had to outweigh the annoyance of the entry process. As Brett recalls it, his first post on Reddit “wasn’t anything real special”; it seems unlikely, then, that he would have made it had he not already registered and been ready to go. Jamie told me she’d had the urge to post several times on a social news site but had been deterred by the trouble of signing up before eventually making an account to track her favorite posters; within a few weeks of registering, she’d posted a comment of her own. This suggests that written participation in a space isn’t just about desire or motivation level—that those things interact with entry affordances to determine whether or not a student will follow through and post at a given time, in a given site.
Qualitative Affordances

A qualitative affordance, in its simplest form, provides a system through which readers’ opinions of a text are tracked and displayed back to the community. These systems generally fall into one of three categories: share-based, “like”-based, or two-way. Share-based systems count the number of people who found that content worth sharing to their own followers; scores reflect the popularity and visibility of content, thus inviting implicit judgments about its quality. Twitter’s “retweet” is an example of share-based qualitative voting: If I see a tweet that, for whatever reason, I want my own Twitter audience to see, clicking the “retweet” button will publish it to my own feed. The score next to the original post’s retweet button is then increased by one. “Like”-based systems allow users to register approval of a post. As the name suggests, the most well-known qualitative affordance, Facebook’s “like,” falls into this category: each post has a button users can use to register that they “like” its content. The resulting scores are more explicitly linked to quality than those of share-based systems (we don’t tend to like things we feel are of low quality), but the one-way voting means these scores can only provide limited information on the audience’s overall qualitative opinion. Two-way systems fill in that picture further by allowing users to register both approval and disapproval. In Reddit’s karma system, for example, every post has two arrows in front of it, one pointing up and one down. Users can click these arrows to give the post an “upvote” (+1) or “downvote” (-1). The post’s overall score, as well as the breakdown of total up- and downvotes received, is displayed in the newsfeed next to its title and at the top of the post itself. Since it affords users the chance to register both negative and positive opinions—and, in most cases, to see the breakdown between the two as well as the overall total—the two-way system provides the most explicit window into community’s overall quality judgments.

Each of these systems provides different affordances, empowering users in different ways as both readers and participants (some of which I outline below). But I found that overall, all qualitative affordances, regardless of their exact mechanics, were compelling design mechanics. Students found qualitative affordances compelling for two primary reasons: they eased the transition into participation, and they provided motivation (or the reverse) for posting written content.

In addition to a near-universal affinity for Facebook, 90 percent of participants were regular visitors of at least one participatory space that featured a voting affordance of some kind. Of these 27 students, more than half said they check the score for a piece of content (if one is available) before clicking/reading; by contrast, only 25 percent said they always read an article’s comment section. So it’s unsurprising that far more students identified as regularly using QAs within their loyalty sites than as regular commenters there—a ratio of roughly 4:1. These students are significantly more likely to use QAs to register positive responses than negative ones. To put it
in terms of Reddit karma (the most popular voting system among my interviewees), there’s a lot more “upvoting” than down.

Qualitative affordances were perceived as both lower-effort and lower-stakes forms of participation than writing. Making a written contribution was commonly associated with a range of anxieties—about quality and originality, about correctness (grammatical and factual), about potential responses from others. By contrast, students described using qualitative affordances in terms of simplicity and safety: as “quick” or “easy,” unlikely to cause offense or draw attention. As one student put it, “An upvote’s an easy way to say you like something or you don’t—no one’s going to get mad about an upvote. People usually don’t even get mad about downvotes.” Another student, who said she almost never writes in public online spaces out of privacy concerns, said she does have active accounts on several sites with ranking systems so that she can vote on their content.

When present in a site’s interface, these entry-level forms of participation serve as key steps in the route to active involvement, facilitating a level of participation that otherwise would not exist. All but one of the students who said they first made accounts with a participatory space in order to vote on content eventually went on to participate within those sites via writing—usually through commenting on other people’s posts, but occasionally posting original content of their own. More than half the time, the site in question was Reddit: Ella, Will, Tim, and Kelly all told me that they first made their accounts so they could vote on the posts they were reading; all four of them also told me they then eventually moved on to making posts of their own. “It took a few weeks for me to make an account, because I wanted to upvote things I liked,” Tim told me. “And it was probably another couple weeks or so after that that I posted my first comment.” As discussed here, registration raises the motivation necessary for students to follow through on a writing opportunity. Qualitative affordances helped to cancel out that deterring influence of entry affordances by giving students an incentive to register, thus clearing the way for them to capitalize on smaller and more spontaneous writing opportunities. Brett and Jamie would not have written their early contributions had they not already been registered when they encountered those writing opportunities; both of them made their accounts because they wanted to use a qualitative affordance.

Getting students to cross entry barriers isn’t the only way in which qualitative affordances ease the route to written participation. Regular engagement through qualitative affordances seemed to increase students’ connection to a site’s objectives and values. Harry’s reply to a question about his voting on Reddit exemplifies this trend perfectly. He responded by framing his voting through the practices of the community as a whole: “[W]hat the community wants goes to the top . . . I [vote] for what I want people to see . . . to spread information that’s funny or original and get it some community exposure.” This idea of community contribution shows up
when he discusses writing on Reddit as well—he looks for writing opportunities in “pretty genuine” subreddit communities, “where I could contribute something to that conversation.” But Harry spent five or six weeks visiting the site only to read and upvote content (with a downvote or two in there as well) before any of that writing activity began.

It’s outside the scope of my study to make any claims about the role of interface in community identity. But I can say that qualitative affordances, especially highly visible or two-way systems, did create higher levels of comfort with and investment in a site overall; and that students who displayed such investment wrote more often and more spontaneously than those who did not. This suggests that the role qualitative affordances play in shaping literacy activity goes deeper than helping them past entry affordances; they may lower other barriers as well, the kind posed by sharing writing in any context, digital or not.

Beyond serving as stepping stones toward eventual written participation, ranking systems can act more directly as well, providing concrete motivation—or deterrent—for writing within a site. One student, Chad, went so far as to credit his entire online writing career to qualitative affordances. Chad’s first experience with participatory spaces was a gaming forum. Though he arrived at the site out of an affinity with its content, seeking out cheat codes and strategies for a favorite game, he began writing his own contributions out of a desire for higher and higher rankings. “I’d always be on there, I’d be one of those people and then you’d get like, some sort of like karma for people listening to your posts,” Chad said. “So I was all about that life.” Without this scored recognition, Chad told me that, while he’d likely still have visited the site regularly, he doubts he’d have written within it: “I might care about [a particular game], but if only one person’s discussing it there’s no potential for points, and I probably won’t really care enough to [write anything].”

Chad’s story is useful in showing just how powerful a motivator qualitative affordances can be, but his enthusiasm and directness also make it something of an exceptional case. Most students who mentioned qualitative affordances in connection to their writing motivation were more ambivalent about its role, discussing it as one of several factors in their decisions. Rather than being motivated by QAs themselves, as in Chad’s case, their primary reason for writing was interest in the topic at hand—they had something to say. They brought up qualitative affordances in connection to their overall writing experiences within participatory sites—rather than in the context of specific writing experiences. Ella’s and Kelly’s perceptions of Reddit’s karma system are good examples of this pattern. When I asked them if they cared about their karma scores—the aggregate total of up and downvotes accumulated from all posts a user has made—both were reluctant to either embrace or deny its influence on their posting habits. “Not really,” Ella told me, then paused and added, “[B]ut I kind of do . . . If I get downvoted, it doesn’t ruin my day. But if
I do post something, I check it like every 30 seconds.” Kelly’s response was similar; she told me that if she sees her score take a big plunge or get a big boost, she’ll be excited, but she quickly followed up by telling me that the karma on its own won’t drive her to post: “I don’t really care about it—but do I like to see it growing, not shrinking.” And just as growth can encourage her to post, the opposite prospect can sometimes deter her. “I don’t want to be downvoted into oblivion,” she said. “No one wants that.”

As an interface quality, qualitative rankings create a hierarchy that is low-stakes while also readily visible. They are both more visible and more immediately interpretable than other forms of status found in participatory spaces, such as community recognition or systems of user titles that require special discourse knowledge to interpret (such as those frequently linked to post counts in discussion forums). Even a complete newcomer to Reddit can understand almost immediately what a post or user’s karma count signifies; the significance of user titles or custom visual “flair” may be more opaque and therefore less influential in decisions about engaging with or writing within that space. And even for experienced users, as we see in Chad’s case, qualitative rankings can drive a quest for status just as surely as more community-specific status systems. For this reason, qualitative scores exert a unique influence on writing activity within a space. They shape content and interactive practices by way of their own underlying structures; their presence in a site’s infrastructure calls up activity and writing that would not, could not, exist otherwise.

**Interface as Participatory Exordium**

These examples show that activity in participatory spaces is about more than just production, and that production is motivated by more than just interest in the explicit goals of an online community—both are mediated by interface. This mediation gives it a front-line (if often subtle) role in sifting out which visitors to a space will go on to engage with it further and what that engagement will look like. This complicates our understanding of participatory spaces, which has so far presumed (if tacitly) that contributing to these spaces is equally appealing to all who possess the technical resources and shared affinity. But just as an essay encountered on Yahoo! News won’t appeal equally to all readers, a given participatory space doesn’t appeal equally to all comers; and as we’ve seen, interface seems to have something to do with that.

Teena Carnegie argues that interface’s influence on entry and engagement mirrors that of the classical rhetorical exordium—interfaces, she argues, have become the modern counterpart to the classical concept. According to Cicero, the exordium’s role is to make the listener “well-disposed, attentive, and receptive” to the ensuing speech. And isn’t this, Carnegie asks, the role of the interface as well? An interface exordium, says Carnegie, succeeds by projecting to users the potential for interactiv-
ity within the site that matches their desired engagement while also supporting the ends of the site itself:

As users experience higher levels of interactivity, they experience higher levels of empowerment: they become senders and creators of messages and content. They experience higher levels of control: they choose between options and customize the interface to reflect their tastes, if not interests. They experience higher levels of connection in terms of both social and spatial relationships: they meet, communicate, and build relationships with others, and they explore and encounter new spaces and environments while sitting alone in a single place. Increased interactivity results in increased attentiveness, and increased feelings of empowerment, control, and connection result in increased levels of acceptance (171).

By creating this acceptance through interactivity, Carnegie says, interfaces succeed in making users “well-disposed, attentive and receptive” to the site and its attendant persuasions.

Carnegie’s framework offers a highly useful way of viewing interface’s impact on moments of potential engagement. First, its treatment of interface as a rhetorical appeal to an audience reminds us that participatory spaces, like any other rhetorical objects, are not intended for a universal audience; their rhetorical moves should therefore be considered as a function of their intended audience. An interface that asks users to connect membership and interactivity within its space to their real-life identity is making a statement—about the value of that membership, about the relationship of that membership to users’ larger identities, and about the site’s larger objectives. As my interviews show, these statements are appealing (or perhaps more accurately, acceptable) to some students, and not to others; whether and to what extent they interact with the space further is a function of the interface exordium’s success. By considering the interaction offered to—or required of—users and how they respond, we can evaluate how interfaces make these initial appeals and how they attempt to match design to desired outcomes.

Considering interfaces as digital exordiums pushes against the idea, visible in many discussions of access and interface, that an interface’s appeal to some individuals at the expense of others is a function of bad design. I am not suggesting that such interpretations are incorrect—there’s ample evidence this happens (some of which I’ve already discussed). But I would argue that my interviews do suggest that we shouldn’t automatically assume this is the case for all interface elements that deter certain users from further engagement. Not every exordium succeeds with every listener, nor is it meant to. And while it is true of any type of rhetorical act that an audience member not drawn in by the exordium will not be reached by the rest of the speech, the stakes are arguably even higher in a digital landscape because of the vast number of sites easily available to a given audience. In most cases, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of spaces available to write in for any given inter-
est. Even if the level of interest in a topic is high—even if the existing motivation to write is high—the interface still has a key and delicate job to do drawing users into its particular space, otherwise they will move on in their search for one that does.

In some cases, elements of an interface’s design create barriers to entry by amplifying differences of race, class, or culture. But as we see with Matt and ESPN.com, or Leah and AfterEllen, it is also sometimes simpler than that—mechanics that require unexpected effort to circumvent or that affect initial perceptions of the site in some way. Such filtering effects can be beneficial to users—it led Leah to keep looking until she found Autostraddle, when she might otherwise have invested that participatory energy in a less fulfilling space. It’s important to stay alert to interfaces’ potential to perpetuate the status quo when confronted with interface design that limits access or participation. But we should also be alert to other possible interpretations of design that limits participation and to the idea that in some cases, these barriers act as signals to users that this site simply isn’t what they’re looking for and to keep looking for one that is.

In addition to complicating our consideration of interfaces’ audience appeals, Carnegie’s theory highlights its potential role in motivating and shaping participatory activity. When an interface offers qualitative affordances, it opens a new avenue of participation, one that these findings suggest motivates and shapes the content production that has so far been the focus of our inquiry in these spaces. In an analysis of reader-review culture on Amazon, Douglas Hesse posits that that digital writers draw value as much from the practices that surround digital writing as from the writing itself (148). His findings suggest that writing a response creates “an ethos of being helpful and adding value”—but qualitative affordances “supplement the words themselves with [a] measure of the reputation of their authors” (141). My own findings seem to support this: Harry replies to a question in a tech support forum to build ethos for both himself and the community; the karma score associated with his reply over time shows whether that ethos is born out by community judgment. But these response affordances cut both ways when it comes to written participation: for every Chad writing his way up the ladder of qualitative status, there’s a Kelly or an Ella that decides not to post a response for fear of falling down it. However, even if they pass up more writing chances than they would otherwise, their own use of those affordances still lets them experience high levels of interactivity overall.

It also seems likely that qualitative affordances ultimately create more writing than they quash. Students credited their initial account creation within participatory sites to qualitative affordances far more commonly than writing—and almost all those students said they’ve since made at least one written contribution as well. This suggests that in addition to serving as a source of motivation by themselves (as in Chad’s case), qualitative affordances in participatory spaces act as a stepping stone between observing and creating. Digital exordiums, unlike their traditional rhetorical
counterparts, act continually to make their users receptive to their overall goals—which for participatory spaces almost universally involves content production. And my interviews indicate that qualitative affordances are an effective tool in that longer game. The fact that students were aware of the influence qualitative scores exerted on their own reading and writing experiences suggests that these affordances give them a sense of agency within a space, one that over time makes written participation a more natural (or at least less daunting) proposition. It’s not surprising, then, that an expanded range of response practices (the majority of which have qualitative elements) has become a common feature among digital exordiums of all kinds.

Qualitative affordances “engage audiences not only in action, but in interaction” (Carnegie 171), and that is what audiences are looking for, including, as I’ve shown, our students. A writer’s sense of their audience is a source of both constraint and invention; because “readers’ own experiences, expectations, and beliefs play a central role in their reading of a text” those preexisting elements, known or inferred, provide writers with the material to power their composing process (Lunsford and Ede 1984). This relationship has become increasingly central in the digital landscape. In an update to their widely cited “Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked,” Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede point out that digital media “have opened opportunities for audiences to take on agency and to become participants and creators/shapers of discourse in more profound ways than ever before” (251), drawing audience even more deeply into the composing process. View counts, votes, reblogs, and their many qualitative cousins thus create choices for authors about what and where to focus their writing efforts: “[T]he more items one reviews, the more readers are likely to see and be able to vote on them. By the same token, if one reviews relatively fewer [but] popular items . . . one will be exposed to a broader readership” (Hesse 141–42). The writers of these reviews, in other words, are driven as much by the impulse to review as to see evidence of their own words being read by others. A silent but visible audience reminds writers within affinity spaces that they are writing for more than themselves—that their writing has a wider reach, and potentially a wider purpose, than that which is immediately visible.

Interfaces that afford their users the chance to write “[g]ive] writers a pretext to write themselves” (Hesse 148). An interface with qualitative affordances gives its readers a pretext to reveal their presence in that writing’s audience. In combination, they give new visibility and immediacy to the relationship between reading and writing, author and audience. They also create an exordium of deep interactivity and correspondingly significant allure.

**Digital Practices for the Classroom Exordium**

By traditional definition the “classroom” exordium would be the first-day introductions and the syllabus handed around with it—the introductory outlining of the course
as a whole. But students don’t become attentive and receptive to an entire course simply based on those opening contents. It’s an ongoing process, one that begins anew with each lesson, each assignment, each reading and discussion. I would argue then that like those of new media texts, the exordium of the writing classroom “is ever-present . . . work[ing] continually to engage the audience not simply in action but in interaction” (Carnegie 171). The goals of the classroom exordium are also the same as those of their digital counterparts: to create “well-disposed, attentive, and receptive” users—or students, in our case—who feel empowered by and connected to the objectives and activities of the classroom. As I’ve shown above, digital exordiums succeed by keeping entry barriers low and participation affordances varied. In these concluding paragraphs, I offer some thoughts on what it might look like to apply these principles to our instructional design.

Removing entry barriers makes it easy to write out an idea or response on impulse, making users (or students) more receptive to the source of those potential ideas. It can be difficult to accommodate that kind of spontaneity in formal writing instruction. Blogging provides some of the participation affordances digital exordiums use to create interactivity, but classroom applications often come with high entry barriers. Students have to schedule time to write the assigned post, navigate to the site, and log in before they can write; even if the project is well-designed for other objectives, its exordium doesn’t make students receptive to using it for the kind of small, spontaneous writing acts that motivate their engagement outside the classroom. One approach could be to revise or supplement such projects so that their entry affordances can be bypassed or controlled by the instructor. For example, an in-class “microblogging” project in which students are required to make some number of short (even very short) posts to a class blog or Twitter stream each week; students would log into their posting accounts during a designated two-minute “sign-in time” at the beginning of each class. Removing entry barriers in the course of daily class routine brings students one step closer to sharing and responding through writing; setting weekly requirements rather than daily ones restores some control over these written interactions, potentially resulting in more of the spontaneous, interest-driven writing that characterizes digital spaces. If students pass through entry barriers in the course of everyday class routine, they may be more likely to act spontaneously on impulses to share or respond to ideas.

We should also work to create more room for literacy practices related to reading and reader response. The majority of students’ literacy activity online unfolds through such practices, and students are therefore drawn to digital exordiums that project high levels of interactivity and control related to consumption. The classroom exordium, however, is typically much more limited in this area. Students can voice their opinions in discussion and workshops, but this is a high-stakes practice for many students and one that, again, doesn’t capture smaller or more spontaneous reactions to what they’re consuming. When they read in digital spaces, students can
vote on a text, share it beyond its original audience, and use hyperlinks or bookmarks to create concrete associations between what they just read and an article from two weeks ago. This is a much wider range of interactions than is typically offered in class.

I am not suggesting that we start asking students to vote anonymously on the quality of each other’s work. But I think we should work to create more opportunities for interactivity that fall between consumption and production. Allowing students to contribute content they come across in other contexts to a class compendium, for example, that would then be collaboratively curated into a digital bibliography for the course themes. The sharing and linking practices students use to contribute this content gives them agency in both their individual literacy routines and in the classroom; using a one-way voting system as part of the curating process adds still another level of control, one that acknowledges the value of the consumer’s role in course objectives. It also acknowledges their growing role in the writing process.

As I discuss here, students are aware of how interface affordances contribute to the thinning barrier between author and audience. Tapping into that knowledge doesn’t require interacting with those affordances directly; making room for them regularly in discussions of audience and rhetorical context can itself increase the scope of the class’s exordium. An instructor might begin a lesson about audience by inviting students to share a recent experience in which they responded to a piece of writing by voting, sharing, or commenting. Those examples could then serve as the starting point for a discussion of the relationship between author and audience, one that is not only rooted in concrete and familiar experience, but which reflects the reality of contemporary writing conditions. Even though voting systems and view counts may not factor in the course assignments themselves, students see the practices given an ongoing part in rhetorical inquiry—potentially helping them more easily see a place for themselves as well.

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We know that interfaces are rhetorical. What I’ve tried to do in this article is show how that rhetorical dimension matters to our students’ experiences: it matters because it affects their decisions about following through on the opportunities within these spaces for interaction and literacy activity. The signals of interface act alongside other factors like interest levels and individual objectives in determining whether a student will stick around to learn what a space has to offer. Its entry affordances can hold otherwise loyal and interested users at a distance if they ask more of those users than they’re willing to give. And by offering qualitative affordances as a lower-stakes means of participation, interfaces can counteract those same reservations, as well as provide a bridge to ease the journey from consuming to participating. In light of this, we need to interface our existing theories of digital participation and writing instruction with the active rhetorical role of interface. By highlighting the
role interface plays throughout the stages and levels of digital interaction, Teena Carnegie’s theory provides a useful starting place for this work. Brought to bear on accounts and observations of literacy and interaction within participatory spaces, her theory helps make visible the interactions between digital interface and individual, concrete affordance and community and offers a way to begin translating those lessons into our classrooms.

ENDNOTES

1. Sarah J. Arroyo’s Participatory Composition: Video Culture, Writing, and Electracy is one example of such theorization, figuring students’ participatory practices online as a unique and pedagogically relevant style of composing.

2. For a more expansive theoretical perspective on the topic, see Chapter 1 of Collin Brooke’s Lingua Fracta, or The Interface Effect by Alexander Galloway; for a consideration of interfaces as coded entities, see Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games and Software Studies.

3. Since the bulk of recruitment in one location took place over the summer of 2013, the course level was largely a function of availability; the same levels were targeted during fall recruitment at the second site for consistency.

4. About 2/3 of students came from intro-level or intermediate composition courses; the rest were drawn from 100-level literature survey courses.

5. The concept of affordance has an extensive and fairly complex history, and its exact meaning remains a topic of debate, particularly within technical communication and human-computer interaction research; see, for instance, Huatong Sun’s Cross-Cultural Technology Design or Susan Wells’ “Technology, Genre, and Gender: The Case of Power Structure Research.” But this active debate and varied application is arguably part of what makes the term so useful to the new media conversation as a whole, since, as Kristine Blair points out both explicitly and implicitly in her review essay “New Media Affordances and the Connected Life,” it helps us thread together “[what] initially appear to be disparate discussions” (315).

6. These findings disagree with Sun’s on their face, but given the significant differences in study aims and design—specifically Sun’s focus on cross-cultural user experience—this tension is most likely attributable to situational factors than a deeper disagreement

7. For more on the effects of audience’s changing role, see Elizabeth Bird’s The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World.

8. My intent here is not to say that blog projects must look like this to be productive, but to highlight the way specific design considerations can expand the ability to support to an exordium of spontaneous interactivity. There are many other successful blogging pedagogy models—two online examples are Annette Vee’s “How to Teach With Blogs” and the University of Texas-Austin Blogging Pedagogy project.

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