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Postings on a Genre of E-Mail

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Michael Spooner
and Kathleen Yancey

Postings on a Genre
of Email

```
> Kathleen, How does this grab you for
the opening?                    <mspooner>
```

I was talking with a novelist recently about various kinds of writing—nothing special, just happy-hour talk—and I found my earnest self assuring him that, oh yes, academic writing nowadays will tolerate a number of different styles and voices. (I should know, right? I'm in academic publishing.) He choked; he slapped my arm; he laughed out loud. I don't remember if he spit his drink back in the glass. Silly me, I was serious. And, among other things, I was thinking about this essay/dialogue, in which we're turning discourse conventions of the net—often a rather casual medium—to some fairly stuffed-shirt academic purposes.

Interesting that you call it an essay/dialogue (nice slide, that one). But many readers will expect a "real" essay here—or, betterworse, an academic essay. And we know what that means: a single voice, a single point (to which all the others are handmaidens), a coherence that's hierarchically anchored.

We couldn't say this in one voice. We—Griffin, Sabine, and Georgia notwithstanding—aren't one; we don't have identical points of view. This could have been an

Kathleen Yancey and *Michael Spooner* discovered a common affinity for the net while Kathleen was developing her collection, *Portfolios in the Writing Classroom: An Introduction,* and Michael was Senior Editor at NCTE. They have written together on email, first the concluding chapter for Kathleen's *Voices on Voice,* and then the present text, Michael from his desk in Logan, where (when he isn't emailing) he directs the Utah State University Press, and Kathleen from an English Department computer lab at UNC Charlotte, where she teaches (when she isn't emailing). Their current project is an exploration of collaboration—where else?—online.

epistolary novel, were we novelists; it could have been a Platonic dialogue, except that most of Plato is single-minded essay in dialogic dress. This text takes the form of dialogue and is a dialogue.*

Not just our own two voices here, either. Others interrupt us with commentary, obiter dicta, humor. All writers hear voices, but here we've made the convention/al choice to amplify those voices that inform us (or contradict us). It's different from essay, article, paper, dialogue, because this convention allows more juxtaposition with less predication. On the other hand, it's very like discourse on the net, but more coherent, more pre/pared. This has been done before, even in the academic world. It re- minds one of Winston Weathers's Grammar B discussions, though we're not being as artistic as the authors he has in mind. But there's something about email that brings this out, and I'm predict- ing it will be commonplace within a very short time.

It's too much to claim that it's Bakhtin uncovered, but that's its tenor. Email seems to make this aspect of language more obvious. The point is that reading this piece is in some way like emailing, feeling the staccato effect of jumbled messages, the sense of the incoherent ready to envelop you, the quick as well as the sustained. Voices always populate; the transmission of them on email is just more obvious—flagrant, al- most—celebratory.

To use the tropes and gestures of the net seemed an obvious decision in an article about the discourse of the net. Natural, too, because we've composed it entirely from email ex- changes. (In fact, I don't remember the last time I actually saw you: 1993?) Then there's the fact that we don't agree about the topic.

Our disagreement makes the blender-voice of many co- authored pieces virtually ;) impossible for this one. Besides, the disagreement is part of the content. It's important to show that, while we do work toward each other, we finish feeling that there is still room for two separate soapboxes at the end. At least two.

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*A word on mechanics. Quotations from email postings are indicated with a leading >; user names are indicated within < >; we include "emoticons," like "smilies":) (turn it sideways) and abbreviations for common phrases like <imho> ("in my humble opinion"); asterisks around a word mark emphasis (e.g., *emphasis*); and a single underscore before and after a phrase (as in _The Electronic Word_) indicates a book title. Many readers are familiar with these already.

I don't think we have an argument with each other so much, even though we do have more than a single point of view. But we write in different voices, and this is a problem if one insists on proper genres. Can't we just call it a text?

What is the difference between an article and an essay? A dialogue and a paper? Between hard copy and email? Between what we are submitting and what certain readers expect? Those questions all center on genre—a central thread woven here. The essay genre becomes a place where genre itself is the topic of inquiry, even of dispute.

One thing we do agree about is that email offers new ways of representing intellectual life. This is one way.

```
> :) This post has been smiley-captioned for the irony-
impaired. :)                                    <skeevers>
```

The Digitized Word

Email is a floating signifier of the worst sort—whether it's called E-discourse, or VAX conferences, or whatever. So the first task is to narrow the focus. Let's look at these few dimensions.

• Email simple. Much like writing a letter, it is signalled by greetings, emoticons, closings, and other conventions; sometimes the author composes online, sometimes uploads a prepared text; author and topic are not unique, but audience is (as in letters). In its affective dimension, it feels like a hybrid form, combining elements one would expect in letters, on the phone, or in face-to-face conversation.

• Email on "lists"—electronic discussion groups. These groups have developed a new lexicon to cover unique rhetorical or technical functions online (e.g., flame wars, FTPs, lurkers, emoticons). Within the lists that I know, there is an evident territoriality (we who use the list, those who don't—benighted souls), but also an effort to democratize interaction. Some explicit conventions of interaction ("netiquettes") are established, others are in process, others implicit.

• Email in the classroom. Cooper and Selfe (1991) argue that democracy is closer in the computerized classroom. I wonder. I think a number of the features that seem to define lists do not obtain in the classroom—mostly authorial authority. But it does offer another kind of interaction, a chance to write differently, a different *opportunity* to learn.

• Email as resource. This is the networking function that Moran mentions—the thinking together that creates "a corporate, collaborative, collective 'self' that is more social and therefore more knowledgeable than the old" (193).

• Email as mode of collaboration. As we write together/to(each)other, the author and audience elide; how does one represent that—in a single voice? in multiple voices? in CAPS? in multiple typefaces?

It's easier to see these as discrete categories in theory than in practice. For example, we've both taught students in at least the first four of these five dimensions, overlapping freely. In many classrooms, they use the fifth one, too.

*It is also worth pointing out that merely *composing* on a computer does *not* make your list here. It is clearly electronic writing, but these days it has been absorbed into the normal. Not so long ago, using a computer at all to teach writing was considered so novel that many teachers bought books to help them do it (e.g., Rodrigues and Rodrigues, 1986). Now, many (I'd guess *most*) writing teachers and students compose with computers routinely. And, while electronic writing in the classroom offers some unique opportunities that progressive teachers are exploring, it hasn't *required* a shift in any single teacher's pedgogical values: while some classes are models of social constructivism, others are still cranking out those five-paragraph themes. That is, the machine will serve the most progressive and the most traditional practice with equal indifference.*

On both counts, agreed. The second, first: the fact that a pedagogy seems innovative or uses new technology does not prevent it from simply reproducing the prior paradigm. Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway make this point when talking about journals, which they see, all claims notwithstanding, not as a new genre, but as another and unacknowledged kind of test—a replication of the same game:

Although the writer's focus was now claimed to be solely on thinking about the topic, the rhetorical demands had not disappeared; they had simply taken a new form. Journals were, in our experience, still judged as *writing* and not just for the assistance they provided to the students' learning. The generic criteria were not made explicit, but, as Barnes and his colleagues found, clever students knew they were there. (18)

As to the first point about classroom email practice *incorporating* many of the features articulated in the list above, again, agreed. But classroom email is different in kind. Janet Eldred and Ron Fortune (1994) use classroom policy as the lens allowing us to see email as its own type. Consider the case of the email listserv group: subscribers presumably elect to subscribe, and there's no rule or convention or folkway that says they *must* participate. They may choose the Bartleby route, preferring not: they can lurk. But if an email "discussion" group is a requirement of the course, lurking is not an option; it's forbidden.

The point? Classroom email has a different set of conventions than other emails; precisely because it takes place in a different context, it inscribes a different ideology.

Vignette 1

They're mighty white, I think, as I wander into the IBM classroom. There are 18 of them, methods students and prospective teachers, and they're mighty female, too. On a second take, I see: they are all white, all women, and all anxious as they pose at keyboards, studiously avoiding them, carefully *not* touching them, collectively praying that our meeting in *this* classroom is a function of computer error. Computer error, after all, can be fixed.

Several tasks we have, I say. Write to Purdue's On-Line Writing Lab and secure some handouts that will help you. You are in groups, I say; here are the IDs. Read the Ednet discussions on grading, I tell them, as I hand out 13 pages of listserv discussions on grading.

Mimi says we shouldn't have to do this; we don't have any *real* students so we can't develop a grading philosophy *now*. Angie writes me an email begging me to

stop this exercise; it's too frustrating, and they already have too much to do.

They write, they cc to me. One group decides to number their posts to each other, in order to get a sense of chronology. They all greet each other as in a letter, and they all close: "See ya!"s and "Later"s predictably end the screen. They reassure each other that everyone is frustrated; they respond to each other's points, with varying detail. They share news. Kim writes, addressing me more as a friend than a teacher, remarking on the orange juice I might be drinking as I read her post. Through the opaque window of email, she sees teacher as person. We begin to see each other a little differently, a little more fully. If the medium is the message, then affect is the medium.

Two weeks later a set of papers comes in. Sam's paper is among the best, and, to be honest, I'm a bit surprised at the quality of her work. Not that I thought she was incompetent, but she's the sort of student who's easy to overlook: compliant, not terribly vocal, older than the others—a "returning student." (And I admit: I'm troubled when she tells me, early on, that teaching will be "convenient," easily slotted among motherhood, wifehood, the PTA, and Sunday school teaching.) More to the point perhaps, she's new to computers.

> Sitting at the computer the first day of class was more stress and agony than I had imagined. I had never used a computer before, and now I was expected to write with one. When our class did a SneakerNet as an opening exercise, I did not know how to scroll the screen and there wasn't time to ask for help. . . .

Sam chooses to take her midterm on computer, earns the highest A in the class. During our 14-day email cycle, she posts among the highest number of messages (ten of them) in the class and writes on various topics—including appropriate uses for technology in the classroom. After the email cycle is over, she continues to post. Always, she is aware of how the computer is changing her world, changing her.

```
Hi, I saw something interesting in the Ob-
server today. There was an article on com-
puter-user language and do you know what
"snail-mail" is? It refers to slower mail
or any mail that is not E-mail! That meant
something to me today but one week ago I
wouldn't have understood that description.
```

Sam uses the occasion of composing her portfolio to look back—"Putting together the portfolio was actually a review of the course"—and to anticipate what she will do next—take more coursework in computer technology, with specific application to teaching and to using writing with the computer.

At the end of the term, I attempt to distribute the collections I have maintained, in my closet of an office, to trashcans and bookshelves and file cabinets, as students drop by to collect their portfolios. Sam arrives; we talk. She regrets that her email has been cancelled. Oh, yes, they do that fast, I say, once the term is over. I can co-sign for you if you'd like to have another account, I say. Well, maybe next fall, she says. See you soon, we say.

Thirty minutes later, she's back, asking me to co-sign. Welcome to the net. ;)

Virtually Yours

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The emotional boundaries of our encoun-
ter seemed to have been much expanded by
the email that preceded it.
                              —John Seabrook
```

If you have been in love, if your lover could write, you know what I mean: it appears every day. It's transactive—not plain exposition, not pure narrative. It's a letter, but then, not the sort of letter you get from the bank or university. It's more like conversation. It's not conversation: it's one-way, and it's written. And it's written in the knowledge that days may pass between the writing and the reading—that in fact (though heaven forbid) it may be lost before it reaches you. As you read it, it speaks in the familiar voice of news, disappointments, and desires. It's affectionate—full of affect. Sometimes it's telegraphic, sometimes oblique, sometimes it includes a sort of lover's code: silly abbreviations <imho> <rotfl>, smiley faces:), Xs and Os.

```
> loved your smiley run over by a truck:..-_ <lffunkhouser>
```

I want to argue that what email writers are doing on the net does not in essence or in genre differ from what writers do off line. In some cases, it looks like a business letter. Sometimes it's a bulletin, sometimes a broadside, sometimes a joke, a memo, a grafitto, a book. In many one-to-one postings, email shows all the features of the lovers' correspondence you used to read (or did you write it?) every day.

So email is like a letter, a personal letter that allows both cognition and affect: is that it?

Often, yes. But often otherwise. I send and receive formal letters (a different genre, by most accounts) via email, too. Also announcements, assignments, essays, one-liners, poems, and dirty jokes. Just like paper and ink, this technology allows a wide range of genres. *That's* the point.

So it's not a genre, you say. Well. There are several ways to look at this question: we could try older, more literary definitions of genre, grounded in form; we could include more recent rhetorically-based definitions, more oriented to the social dimension; and we could speak from the vantage point of literary theory so dominated by interest in the ideological workings of genre. Or we could simply listen in on the thing itself:

```
>I found myself writing to a friend last night...and
thinking how there *is* a difference between writing and
this spontaneous posting that we do.          <mullanne>

>...our conversations seem much more like oral conversa-
tion than like written correspondence.          <newmann>

>...there is an element of spontaneity. And the essen-
tials of conversation (as opposed to letter-writing) are
there: a topic focus, a variety of voices, and statement-
response structure. But unlike conversation, each of us
can 1) edit and 2) speak without interruption. <csjhs>

>...we all adopt a light, informal tone (and some real
wit too) that is too often missing from letters typed on
university letterhead.                          <harrism>

>If writing on the net is a hybrid, what shall we call it?
Well, it seems...to be kinda in between expressive
writing...and transactional....Maybe we could call it
```

```
expractional? Or transpressive? Then, again, it gets
downright poetic at times.                      <ccrmitta>
```

These writers or speakers—or what shall we call them?—seem to share common perceptions about email, about its friendliness, about its use for play as well as for thinking, about its novelty, about its inability to be categorized into any of the conventionalized schemes. I think this last point may serve as a place to start.

I don't seriously disagree with the consensus expressed by these folks, but there's something in it that troubles me: I wonder if we've truly come far enough in theorizing the electronic conference (whether one-on-one or in a group) to claim what these folks are claiming.

The consensus is not limited to this group, of course; it's repeated throughout the literature on computers and composition. And the consensus claims a great deal more than the comments above reveal. For example, we're told that the net is inherently non-hierarchical, "intrinsically communal," and that it is challenging the "hegemony of the teacher" (respectively: Zamierowski; Barker and Kemp; Cooper and Selfe). There's a fervor about this body of opinion.

```
> The Internet's glorious egalitarianism is one of its
chief attractions for me.                       <csjhs>
```

*But these community-enhancing qualities of the net seem more
assumed in the work on computers and composition than
demonstrated, and I'm not sure we have examined our assumptions. Consider these few comments, selected from a single discussion thread on a single list (Cybermind).*

```
>...however much I may like these identity-erasing fa-
cilities of the Net, my actual feelings of community are
predicated on, and arise only with the revelation of,
identities.                                     <malgosia>

>...my virtual communities are very dependent on gender
and sexualities.                                <lysana>

>Not everybody came here to form a community (maybe no
one did; it wasn't on the agenda), and not everybody
wants one.                                      <marius>
```

*In Hawisher and LeBlanc's _Re-Imagining Computers and
Composition: Teaching and Research in the Virtual Age_, Gail
Hawisher acknowledges that "...as yet there are only a few*

studies of the electronic conference that have been conducted within composition studies" (84). She alludes to research in fields like distance education and information science, and she suggests that it supports the current heady consensus about computers in composition. In other publications, Hawisher has been careful not to overlook potential misuses of technology in pedagogy (e.g., 1991), and I don't necessarily doubt her here. There is surely research underway now specifically on issues in computers and composition, but in the meantime, should we rely on inference and extrapolation from other fields to give us the grounds for declaring utopia-at-hand in *writing*?

But is this *writing*?

Isn't it?

In the same collection, Paul Taylor effectively summarizes the consensus when he says, "computer conferencing is evolving into a new genre, a new form of communication that has not been possible before now" (145). Not to single out Taylor, but, when he (as momentary speaker for all this enthusiasm) applies Carolyn Miller's criteria for genre identification to computer conferencing, immediately he has to fudge.

> *First, the associated texts must exhibit similarity in form. Although computer-based messages are not yet exceptionally uniform, they do display several common features. . . . Second, Miller states that the genre must be based on all the rhetorical elements in recurring situations. Do computer conferences arise from a genuine exigence relative to a specific audience? Only if we begin to narrow the terms somewhat—if we begin to see computer conferencing not as a single genre, but as a collection of related genres. (145)*

A genre of genres? Wishful thinking. And I wish he'd bluffed— held out for a vision of one E-Genre. After all, if we equivocate on any of Miller's criteria, the whole case caves in. And he has to equivocate on two.

The facts are, on the one hand, that computer-based messages (whether in conference or not) come in a *very* wide variety of forms and, on the other hand, that they have common features with a zillion forms of *non*-computer-based writing: e.g., the memo, the report, the bulletin, the note, the list, the valentine. One could argue that the *only* distinctive feature of online writing is that it is transmitted via computer. And further, if we see computer conferencing "not as a single genre, but

as a collection of genres," we're tripped again. Why gather them generically here? Why not let them individually stand where they were—with the memo, the report, the bulletin, and the others—where they have both formal and rhetorical commonality? Just because we send them over the net? It seems to boil down to that.

I can't see why the technology associated with a text is enough to warrant the claim of a distinctive genre. To my mind, we have to think of genres of writing as logically larger than the technologies through which we convey them.

I agree that today's technology shows much of the wonder and potential that these writers see in it. Perhaps the most careful, thorough exploration of this potential that I have read to date is in Richard Lanham's _The Electronic Word_—a portion of which I actually received via email from the publisher. This is the hopeful claim of the rhetorician that the computer is intrinsically a rhetorical device, and that through digitization it will invevitably democratize education in the liberal arts. Again, I don't much disagree about the computer's potential here—until we start using words like "intrinsic." Because it is quite clear that the same technology that stirs hopes like Lanham's for a postmodern avatar of the Rhetorical Paideia even now serves pedagogies of drill-and-skill, of Great Books, and other rigid traditional paradigms. The same technology.

My point is simply this: we are seeing a transition in the technology that delivers our written genres, not an innovation in genres themselves. And, in our enthusiam for the (mere) technology, we are mistaking transition for innovation.

Vignette 2

These days *nothing stays buried.* . . . Particularly not on a computer.

—Gail Colins

"Do you mind if we take notes on the computer?" asks Tara. "It's easier for us, but I know the clattering distracts some teachers."

These students are computer-literate—23 seniors in the Tech Writing program. They are also white, most of them are women, middle-class, and they're from predominantly religious, politically conservative, semi-rural communities in the West. All right: they're Mormon kids.

The computers are high-grade for the times (and for any-where in the college of humanities): twenty workstations outfit-ted with network software and several industry-standard programs. There's email with an uplink to Internet, and, oh yes, a couple of games. When I boot up, my machine plays a clip from Pink Floyd. "Hey! Teacher! Leave them kids alone!"

Like the others, Tara has never used the Internet, and she has only a general concept of a listserv or newsgroup. But she shrugs. It's just another network like the classroom LAN or the campus VMS. After minimal instruction from me, she attacks the subscribe routine through her workstation; she's an Internet listmember within five minutes.

I ask the students to comment on the Internet discussions as well as other matters in their online journals. They are used to the idea—both writing such things and the process of saving their entries to a common area on the network. They know how to check back later for my replies. In one entry, Tara complains about how tedious the listserv of copyeditors can be.

```
I mean, it's interesting to see the comments
on [whether to use] one space or two after a
period, but is it really worth 25 postings?
```

In another, she reflects on the topic of obscenity on email—some-one used the F-word in a realtime electronic conference in anoth-er class.

```
Since the letter was sent to the entire class
as instructed, everyone got the message. Some
people were offended, others were not. One
general argument was that if you don't want
to read that kind of thing, don't—delete it!
The other argument was: even if you decide to
immediately delete it, you have already been
offended the instance [sic] the word hit your
eyes.
```

In her journal, Tara didn't make any comments about the difference between online writing and writing to a printed page. Where she referred to online issues at all, she was concerned not with the writing, but with matters of propriety—the choices and judgment of individuals in relation to others—as in the two quotations above.

In other words, the technology was transparent to her. And, ironically, this is best illustrated by an amusing twist from the end of the quarter. Finals were over, students were gone, and I

was clearing the journal directory. There I found a long letter from Tara to one of her classmates—evidently dropped into my space by mistake. Suddenly, I was a teacher picking up folded notes from the virtual classroom floor, somewhat stunned to see my best student write:

```
Well, I gotta go! Class is over! As you
can see I find ways to entertain myself in
class since I don't get anything out of the
lectures!
```

Welcome to the net. ;)

A Virtual Genre

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            If E-mail represents the renaissance of
            prose, why is so much of it so awful?
                              —Philip Elmer-DeWitt
```

"Conceptual or substantive identity" and "procedural identity" are key terms that Larson used in arguing that the research paper as currently taught in freshman comp isn't a real paper. I liked the terms, and I thought they might help me think about genre—as having these kinds of identity.

Several articles composed via email collaboration have been published by now; how did the authors know how to write them? How do we know what we're doing here? When I use email in my class this term, I want the students to write *this way*—but what *is* this way? And what conventions should I point out to them as accepted? Students have enough trouble trying to navigate through "regular writing," yet if I want to extend the class and show them how we are working (e.g., in this paper), I have to help them do this. But *this* is still undefined.

```
>I just got a beep from you. Let me send this now, and
I'll read you, then finish.                    <mspooner>
```

If you want to argue, therefore, that *this* is not a genre, that's fine with me, but it doesn't absolve you of the need to show students how to put such a piece together. There is still a lot to be learned here about composing.

And the medium allows us to claim what is ours—as it makes the audience real. The fictionalized audience itself becomes a fiction, and the concept of author becomes more collective. In other words, the rhetorical situation is different—not theoretically so much as really, practically.

According to a definition of genre that is oriented to purpose or to social action, this should make a difference.

I'm in accord with you on the need for a social or purpose-oriented approach to genre. I'll accept Swales' claim that "the principal criterial feature that turns a collection of communicative events into a genre is some shared set of communicative purposes" (51).

However, the mere fact that we can discover the several different dimensions to electronic writing you described earlier is evidence to me that we are not in the realm of a single rhetorical situation. Among the five dimensions you listed are family resemblances, but they do not represent a coherent set of communicative purposes, let alone a coherent set of formal conventions. By the logic of the social/purposive approach to genre, electronic writing is no more one genre than writing on clay tablets is one genre (cf. Swales on correspondence, p. 53). At best, we have a random clutch of communicative purposes and an enthusiasm for tech novelty.

According to Swales, a genre is "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes" (58), and which can vary along three dimensions (at least): complexity of rhetorical purpose; degree of advanced preparationor construction; and medium or mode (62). Swales also talks about pre-genres and multi-genres: the former too persuasive and fundamental to be generic, a place of "life" from which other genres may emerge; and the latter, the multi-genre, a larger category including several genres, as in letters vs letters-of-condolence (58–61).

```
Could I get back to you by email? I'm not comfortable
dealing with you in voice mode.                  —Anon.
```

Bakhtin seems to make the same distinction between pre-generic and generic communications when he talks bout primary and secondary genres: secondary genres "absorb and digest primary (simple) genres that have tak-

en form in unmediated speech communication" (946).
And as we might expect, he describes secondary genres as
arising "in more complex and comparatively highly de-
veloped and organized cultural communication (primari-
ly written) that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so
on." (946) But what Bakhtin has done in his formulation
is to validate as genre what Swales calls pre-genre, by
classifying *all utterances* as participating in genre, the
distinction resting on the same features later identified by
Swales, especially organized communication.

Others have made contributions to the definition that
will help us. Lloyd Bitzer discusses rhetorical situations,
like genres, and the role that recurrence plays: "The situ-
ations recur and, because we experience situations and
the rhetorical responses to them, a form of discourse is
not only established but comes to have a power of its
own—the tradition itself tends to function as a constraint
upon any new response in the form" (13). And, as Vin-
cent Leitch says, the constraints—the conventions—
helping to define genre act "as political instruments in-
suring order, effecting exclusions, and carrying out pro-
grams" (94). Genre is never innocent, he reminds us.
Carolyn Miller makes the same point, but with greater
attention to the role of social action in genre. Despite its
ideological authority, however, genre is neither com-
pletely stable nor fixed. As Catherine Schryer observes,
"Genres come from somewhere and are transforming
into something else" (208).

> To be able to create discourse that will count as a certain
> kind of action, one has to be able to produce a text with
> the features that distinguish it as belonging to a certain
> genre. One has to know that form to be able to perform.
> (Fahnestock 267)

The English novel as developing genre helps illustrate
the concept. Its beginnings, most literary historians
agree, took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth
centuries. According to Walter Allen (1954), this was in
part a function of literary history. Elizabethan drama,
with both tragedy and comedy, with realistic characters
and plots, with audiences of ordinary people, played an
unwitting role in preparing for a new genre. History it-
self, the recorded variety, played another; written ac-

counts of events and people and places, buttressed by diaries and autobiographies—the latter genre also evolving at this time—provided material and context for the novel, as well as a kind of preparation for the acceptance of the realistic as opposed to the fantastic/romantic.

But it was during the nineteenth century that the novel in England flourished. Why? History and the pre-generic "novels" no doubt played their parts, but a critical factor was simply the material conditions of the time, particularly as they affected a possible audience. Given the rise of the middle class in the nineteenth century, the celebration of a middle-class conception of family, the opportunity for leisure and some resources to fund it, the novel easily found a home within the lives of a large group of people. And of course the novel itself was delivered in various forms—through the penny papers and through single editions (which often became different versions of the novel), through the silent reading of an adult, through the performative reading of a mother to spouse and children.

The episodic quality of the Victorian novel resulted, at least in part, from the penny paper distribution schedule. As important, the material conditions of the audience had everything to do with those forms. The point here is that the genre "novel" took more than one form, and the form had everything to do with the means of delivery.

We would say now that this blurred Romantic conceptions of writer and reader. And didn't the audience influence both form and content, in effect pressing the author and publisher to reproduce middle-class ideologies?

Yes. In fact, arguably, both author and audience were influenced by merchants, publishers, and schools, too.

As they are today, as well, or why are we writing this?

So how is literary history relevant to our discussion? As a class of utterances, one could say, email is "pre-genre"—i.e., in the process of becoming genre. We can see analogies between this process and the process that gave us the novel:

• The material conditions of the late 20th century have enabled a group of generally well-educated, relatively affluent people to communicate in a new medium.

• Many of these people believe that this form of communication is new, is different, and that it enacts new relationships between authors and readers. There is, in other words, an ideology already at work here, and it entails social action.

• Email seems currently, however, to function as a primary utterance. The conventions that its advocates cite as defining it seem closer to those "constraining" a phone conversation, which is itself not a genre. And a lack of consensus governing this "netiquette" suggests that it doesn't yet exert the conserving force characteristic of genre. Through recurrence, however, these conventions will become more stabilized, and will in turn define more clearly what is acceptable, what the boundaries will be.

Email does also, however, seem to be challenging what we have taken to be both the role/authority of the author as well as the relationship between author and audience. As Jay David Bolter suggests,

> The electronic medium now threatens to reverse the attitudes fostered by the [printing] press, by breaking down the barrier between author and reader.... Anyone can become an author and send his merest thoughts over one of the networks to hundreds of unwilling readers. His act of "publication" is neither an economic nor a social event. (101)

If this observation is correct, then the rhetorical situation of email is indeed different—something beyond and apart from other genres. Moreover, as it becomes more stabilized, particularly with reference to rhetorical intent, we should see more clearly the features defining it.

All of which leads me to suggest that email may be a genre-in-the-making.

I'm of two minds about this. In the first place, though Bolter's book, _Writing Space_, is stunning, sometimes I think he is plain wrong about one thing; the "publication" he mentions is indeed a social event, and it may be an economic one as well (as,

obviously, in the case of the many merest advertisements on line). I would suggest further that such phenomena as flaming and "cancelling" (censoring) are evidence that the "barrier between reader and author" is still intact, if it ever was. Besides, "Anyone" has always been an author (i.e., anyone with the means—just like today), and has always been considered important or not at the discretion of the reader.

There's yet one more factor. In a recent piece on writing-in-geography as genre, Bill Green and Allison Lee focus, if implicitly, on the identity a genre requires of its authors. They locate school writing and curriculum as special contexts with special rhetorical situations producing school genres.

According to this formulation, curriculum work, as the provision of appropriate training in subject-disciplinary knowledge, has as part of its effect the projection and production of particular forms of student identity. This production is necessarily tied up with other major identity formations, such as gender, and connected to broader social power dynamics. For us, rhetoric is as much concerned with the formation of identities as the construction of texts.

Another commentator on this scene, speaking of using email in his own classes, also locates the identity issue as central. Russell Hunt sees email as a device for forging and maintaining social relationships as well as for carrying on an intellectual discussion. The politics of email, then, in the larger context are certainly those of the bourgeoisie, who—like other classes—seek to replicate their own ideology. Yes. But the politics are also those of the classroom, where identity formation is chief among its priorities.

I don't argue with the idea that rhetorical situations project and produce forms of identity—aside from an instinct that, for the sake of our postmodern anguish, we overstate this sort of thing. In any case, this doesn't establish that email is a new rhetorical situation or genre; I believe Hunt could perceive the same identity effects by assigning a pen-pal unit. Exchange would be slower, but that has merely to do with the mechanics of the process. It's un-hip, I know, but I tend to believe that rhetorical situations are *not* defined by the mechanical process through

which they travel, so much as by the social purposes of the rhetors. According to your sketch of the English novel, different media (penny papers, single editions) delivered a single genre. In that case, then (and I think in almost all cases), the genre is logically prior to the means of delivery. I don't doubt that new mechanics make new purposes possible (more about that in a minute), but I insist that we're overstating this effect. The purpose that an extant genre serves very rarely disappears at the appearance of a new mechanical device. More likely, the new device is bent to the old rhetorical purpose.

I think that's why most electronic communications are simply reproducing extant genres of writing instead of creating new ones. And for the same reason, I predict that we will see discourse communities online arrange themselves in terms of very familiar hierarchies and conventions. The page, the phone, the monitor is neither the utterance nor the context; it is merely the ground for them.

In fact, I see plenty of evidence on the net that this is true. The material conditions you mention fit here, I believe. One could argue that computer literacy lives within an even more elite socioeconomic hierarchy than does print literacy. But this is often quite forgotten by the users.

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>Distributed technology is the antithesis of the totali-
tarian apparatus, seems to me. Freedom of speech for any-
body who owns a modem.                           <johnmc>
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Leaving merely 90% of Americans disenfranchised. And how many Mexicans? How many Somalis and Burmese? In what may be a watershed article, even Selfe and Selfe, who have often led the optimism in the field of computers and composition, are now sounding a much-needed sobering note:

> *The rhetoric of technology obscures the fact that [computers] are not necessarily serving democratic ends. (484)*

We need to think of cyberspace as the commodity that it is, manufactured and marketed by today's captains of industry for the benefit of those who can afford it. So much of the "university view" of cyberspace seems naive on this point; we seem almost to believe in magic. As if this virtual reality we love were not constructed hammer-and-tongs by grunts in computer factories, packaged and sold by slick marketeers. As if Bill Gates got richer than God by magic. Perhaps this is because we in the university usually don't have to pay our way—access is our caste privilege.

Perhaps it's because Bill Gates looks like us: he's a baby boomer, and very very smart. But the cold gray truth is that cyberspace and its equipment are created in the real world by the same socioeconomic structures that gave us the railroad, the automobile, and the petroleum industry. It is merely our place in the hierarchy that conceals the hierarchy from us. "Let them use modems," we say, in all earnest charity.

Even within the online world, true democracy is a polite fiction. Zamierowski argues that power on lists (electronic conferences) is not hierarchical; it gravitates merely toward wit and erudition, he says, as if those were the great equalizers. But aren't these plain old bourgeois values, revealing their source in our larger social structures? Besides, <imho> even this is a weak version of the truth. Perhaps *especially* on academic/ professional lists, power gravitates toward prestige—prestige in written dialect and opinion at least (common surrogates for wit and erudition); and where user addresses include institutional identifiers, power gravitates toward prestige institutions. Some users even perceive a hierarchy among different lists and networks:

```
>Subscription requests are not automatic for this list.
Your request has been forwarded to ykfok@ttacs.ttu.edu
for approval.                                  <listproc>

>In my experience, most of the regular post-ers on *in-
teresting* lists are not academics.            <artsxnet>

>Anti-AOL rantings routed to temp\trash\bigot\inter
net.                                           <lysana>
```

On less formal lists, power moves toward the most verbal and assertive users—whether they're witty and erudite or not. In other words, when people go online, they do not leave their biases behind. And, circling back, that's also why the "old" genres are being reproduced on the net instead of being replaced with new ones. If electronic communication is pre-generic, this is not because it's still young, but because it's indifferent: it is raw and mutable enough to handle the conflicted array of current genres just fine, thank you. And if you want to try a new one, that's fine, too.

When a new element such as email enters the system that is our profession, it changes every element in that system. (Hawisher and Moran 635)

Among other things, postmodernism has concerned it-
self with the role of context in meaning. The strong posi-
tion is that context *is* meaning, or that meaning is so
context-bound that we cannot ascertain it apart from
context. The literal sentence has become, quite literally, a
dinosaur. We see the influence of this line of thinking on
genre as well. Because genre occurs in context, it too de-
rives meaning from the context, but—just as quickly—it
shapes the context. (They are in dialogue.) As Freedman
puts it: "genres themselves form part of the discursive
context to which rhetors respond in their writing and, as
such, shape and enable the writing; it is in this way that
form is generative" (272). I think, then, that in order to
declare something a genre, we'd have to describe the
context in which it is likely to occur. How fixed is the
context? How particularized? How quickly changing?

A Genre of Chaos

> To most users of the Internet, unbridled freedom,
> even anarchy, are guiding principles.
> —Peter Lewis

*In my second mind, I'm beginning to think that, insofar as
email can be said to make new approaches possible, it might of-
fer most advantage to the anarchic. In many ways, the TV with
a remote controller is analogous. If we think of the remote con-
troller as keyboard, and the TV hour as text to be created, then
the channel-surfing teenager may be the most creative artist yet
undiscovered.*

> *Armed with a remote control, stocked with a cableful of chan-
> nels, the home viewer creates montages of unspeakable original-
> ity, editing parallel transmissions into an individual blend. This
> art form is rhythmic, improvisational, and ironic. (Wittig 90)*

*You get the idea. "Surrealism Triumphant," Rob Wittig calls it
(90), and it is founded in what is essentially a hermeneutic—or
at least an aesthetic—of anarchy. Of course, it is worth noting
that the TV artiste is improvising within a narrow range; he or
she can only create from the very homogeneous values that TV
offers. But at least the principle of random montage is evident.*

*When we recognize that the computer makes an analogous
montaging potential available for the writer, we see some inter-
esting new takes indeed on the scene of writing.*

```
>Moments in MOOspace where multithread con-
versations become recombinant and seem to
take on a life of their own. Part of one
thread responding with amazing aptness to
part of another. A kind of gift.   <swilbur>
```

Eventually—perhaps within a decade—electronic writing and publication will be boringly normal. Predictions about what will then be possible abound: multimedia and hypertext figure prominently; information transfer and storage beyond our wildest dreams. Our technology even now can accommodate not only combined media (e.g., the "publications" on CD-ROM), but combined voices, epistemologies, even intelligences, juxtaposed into densely populated canvasses of electronic text. We may be seeing, in other words, a collapse of written and visual and aural genres back into the collage of raw experience. Only this time, it would be a prepared rhetoric of chaos, a genre of chaos, perhaps, designed to exploit more of our native ability to process many channels of information simultaneously.

But even this doesn't represent a raw new frontier of human communication; it only brings our technology closer to a capacity for what we already do daily, unassisted, in spades. What dinner-table parent isn't all too familiar with multi-tasking? What child isn't alive to two worlds at once? (I return to my student Tara, who does fine work in my class while sending notes online to her girlfriend. The sneak.)

One issue, then, in this kind of discourse, is how to manage the multi-vocality and at the same time create enough coherence that a spectating conversationist can enter the fray, can discern what the fray is. *This* is what we need to teach our students.

The period we are entering . . . will see the ascendance of a new aesthetic animated by the vision of the cultural world as composed of mobile, *interchangeable* fragments—common property—messages constantly in motion, ready to be linked into new constellations. . . .A perfume, a broken muffler, the texture of a boot, two bird calls, and an electronic message will be understood to form an inseparable and organic whole. (Wittig 95)

Instead of hailing a brand-new genre, or speculating on pre-generic stases, perhaps we should re-read your reference to Schryer: written forms have never been seamless wholes—they come from and point to many directions *at once.* And maybe

*we should acknowledge that in the postmodern age, the reader,
not the writer, is the real tyrant: multi-tasking, channel-surfing,
capricious and fickle, free to interpret, misread, manipulate, and
(horrors) apply. We're all guilty; we start at the end, in the mid-
dle, we don't finish, we joyously juxtapose bits of what we read
with other readings, other experiences. But the point is that this
is our most natural process. Both reader and writer are engaged
constantly in making knowledge from a very random world.*

*As our technology enables us to present multi-tasking in
more and more tangible form, maybe we should be predicting
not new genres, but the end of genre.*

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>Communities in cyberspace are "real"—but it's important
to keep in mind that they
are only rhetorical; they have no other
dimension. <baldwine>
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Last winter someone told me that on email, when we
argue in words, we argue. (Decades ago, Scott Momaday
said that we are constructed of words.) Words are, appar-
ently, all we have. But we are production editors now, as
well as writers, changing fonts and adding borders and
lines, managing a rhetoric of the document to energize
the text. Through the technology, we can more easily
than ever make the multilayered "postmodern" dimen-
sion of writing evident.

Which brings us round to the beginning again. The
technologies through which this dialogue/text (and I
sense we are no closer to an answer, but do we need
one?) is composed have made possible (or made conve-
nient—for all but Joe perhaps) the performative stances
we're taking in it. It allows us to use unfamiliar conven-
tions in the familiar context of academic publishing, and
in so doing it highlights the joints
and seams in the process of mak-
ing meaning through writing.

*To call it the end of genre was flip-
pant and extreme, of course (and very
Net—they'd love this on Cybermind),
and it doesn't address all kinds of cognitive theory about our
need for schemata in processing information. Implicit in my ar-
gument all along has been that extant genres are functional
mental frames, and the rise of email doesn't eliminate the need
for them. I see email as merely a kind of tablet with courier at-*

tached. As such, it serves only to deliver extant genres more efficiently than we could deliver them before, and hence I think email itself doesn't destabilize current genres of writing.

But I still think emailing isn't writing—or not the discursive variety we're used to reading in academe. Our expectations will not the centre hold. This is the start of another kind of e-speech-that-is-writing: montage-like, quick, unpredictable in form and substance and tenor. That unpredictability, that flexibility, is its charm and thread. The linear and hiearchical, the neatly categorized, seen under erasure.

Well, yes. Where I wasn't being flip was in the sense that one can see email as symbolic—I think you see it this way—as a harbinger, and multi-media as what it heralds. In that case, our tablet expands in many directions, and we see possibilities for combining text with graphics, with sound, with motion, in a wonderful stage-managed chaos of virtual communication. We become not only the production editors you mention, but the stars and directors of our own movies, or more likely (heaven help us) our own commercials.

Of course, montage and pastiche are increasingly chic now, partly as a function of a society that celebrates its difference by fragmentation. But it's also partly done in defense—to deconstruct before being deconstructed, partly to alleviate the anxiety of influence. In writing, electronic technology is the ideal medium for this. That is an important point, but it's one I think we don't fully comprehend yet. And it's one that is affecting us even as we write this, in ways we can't yet articulate. In other words, working on email—constructing the messages within a pre-genre that is still being shaped itself—is constructing us, too.

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We don't care. We have each other, on the Internet.
                                                    —Dave Barry
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