THE DIGITAL LOCAL: CROWDFUNDING, RHETORIC, AND COMMUNITY

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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Crowdfunding services such as Kickstarter.com, Indigogo, Gofundme, and several others have, in recent years, been drawing increasing attention and funding from both small-scale creative projects and larger-scale personalities alike. Crowdfunding is a type of crowdsourced work where the creators of projects ranging from community restoration to creative publications reach out to the online community, asking for donations in order to fund their projects. Crowdfunding has gained mainstream attention recently with the success of projects like the Oculus Rift, the Pebble Watch, and several niche and indie video games, and has raised questions not only about the changing face of economics, grants, and community-based funding online, but also about the nature of digital collaboration as a whole. A great deal of recent scholarship in various fields has attempted to document what elements of language, culture, geography, and technology contribute to the success or failure of a crowdfunded project. What has not been discussed, however, is how the communities of “backers”, people who donate to projects that catch their interest, form around these projects, and what these gatherings of intrinsically motivated participants can tell us about community and persuasion online. This project will seek to explore the ways in which authors – those who create projects using the crowdfunding site Kickstarter.com – barter social capital for monetary capital, and what this process of exchange between author and audience suggests about the role of persuasion in online communities.
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CHAPTER ONE

A Cat Named Kickstand

In the winter of 2013, a couple in Miami, Florida found a kitten lying on the sidewalk outside of their home. It had been badly injured, the .22 bullet lodged in its side having splintered into fragments when it had been shot. The couple rushed the small kitten to the nearest veterinary clinic, where, after the kitten had been stabilized, they were told that complicated – and expensive – surgery was going to be needed if the bullet fragments were to be removed. With their first child on the way, they were unable to easily pay for the surgery by themselves. So, they posted a simple pitch on the crowdfunding website Kickstarter.com asking for some money for the kitten’s operation, passing the word along through the networks of friends, loved ones, and colleagues within south Florida’s growing but tightly-knit craft beer industry. The money was raised well before the Kickstarter’s time limit was up. The operation succeeded in saving the kitten’s life but not its back right leg, and after recovery, the small kitten was given to a good home. The kitten’s new owners named the limping but happy cat Kickstand.

Kleemann et al. define crowdsourcing as something that “takes place when a profit oriented firm outsources specific tasks essential for the making or sale of its product to the general public (the crowd) in the form of an open call over the internet, with the intention of animating individuals to make a contribution to the firm’s production process for free or for significantly less than that contribution to the firm’s production process for free or for significantly less than that contribution is worth to the firm” (6) and a later article by Belleflamme et al. builds on this definition to specifically characterize crowdfunding: “Crowdfunding involves an open call, mostly through the Internet, for the provision of financial resources either in form of donation or in exchange for the future product or some form of reward and/or voting rights” (7). While the earlier definition locates crowdfunding in profit-driven firms, the latter decentralizes it, allowing for individuals or small non-profits to participate. What both
definitions share, however, is the use of the internet to put out an “open call” for funding of a project, the success of which is dependent upon the enthusiasm of individual investors from the general public. This new model of business has received ample attention from business scholars and economists, who see crowdsourced labor and crowdfunded production as potentially transformative forces. In a study about the economics of crowdfunding, Agrawa et al. state that “Although crowdfunding is presently small in terms of overall economic activity, it is growing in both the variety of sectors to which is applied (e.g., music, sports, video games, education, retail) and the overall value of transactions” (4). They examine the differences between traditional funding through investors and crowdfunding, and demonstrate that crowdfunding “investment patterns over time are independent of geographic distance between entrepreneur and investor after controlling for the entrepreneur’s online social network. This result contrasts with the existing literature that emphasizes the importance of spatial proximity in entrepreneurial finance” and suggest “that online mechanisms can reduce economic frictions associated with investing in early-stage projects over long distances” (19). It is also, despite its decentralized nature and the lack of scholarly research compared to older models of exchange, and is growing in popularity and possibility. A 2015 report by Massolution showed, for instance, that in 2014 lending-based campaigns (where non-monetary rewards are exchanged for donations) raised over eleven billion dollars, three billion of which were categorized under “social causes” (2015 Crowdfunding Industry Report). This and other such studies paint a picture of crowdfunding initiatives as a kind of grant request that lies somewhere between advertisement and investment, and one that is profoundly changing people’s ideas of how business is done in fields like activism, technological production, and creative publication. In many ways, crowdfunding has imposed itself, through thousands and thousands of small-scale creative acts, onto existing systems of publication and ownership of creative texts. It is also, as Agrawa et al. show, a genre that appeals to community ties and connections to the “local.”
Kickstand’s story, in addition to being a ready-made, feel-good commercial for Kickstarter, is also a demonstration of the complex, fluid relationship between communities on and offline. Although the real work in Kickstand’s recovery was done by the couple, the vets, and by Kickstand himself, the contributions provided by the community provided a means for a more complete recovery than might have otherwise been possible. It also demonstrates the fluid nature of the “local”, as the Digital Local of Kickstarter was used to facilitate the participation by members of a traditionally local community – in this case, the couple’s nearest and dearest, many of whom had long since left the geographically local space of Miami. It also shows how, online, communities may form, interconnect, and then disperse along interrelated threads of identification: in addition to donating towards Kickstand’s recovery, I was also personally able to pass the word along to others within my own local community, which led to other donations from people who had never even met the couple. Despite having no connection to the original community of Miami, Florida, there were other intrinsic motivations to participate, either out of a sense of identification with me or their own love of animals. I believe that this branching, temporary community’s formation is owed in large part to two different factors; the relatively cheap “cost” of attention and time required for the buy-in, and, more importantly, the nature of labor in what Johndon Johnson-Eilola calls the “post-Fordist economy”. The work done online may take many forms, and not always to those that are traditionally regarded as labor in classic, pre-digital models of production.

In the digital age, Johnson-Eilola argues, the nature of labor has changed. Unlike older models, where scarcity of material resources constrains the contributions one may or may not offer to a project, the “Symbolic Analytic” labor performed using digital technology to undertake intellectual and creative labor is work that is native to the digital. He writes that modern work is “post-industrial”, meaning that, in the modern business world, work “inverts the relationship between technical product and knowledge product: symbolic analysts make it clear – to themselves, to their employers, to the public – that in an age of ubiquitous technology and information, knowledge attains primary value” (Relocating the Value
of Work, 583). Work in the digital age, as viewed by Johnson-Eilola, is based more around producing, interpreting, and contextualizing information. This is owing to the widening scope and ubiquity of digital communications technologies and the decline of material scarcity as a limiting factor in the production of useful, digital goods. This has, in turn, affected the ways in which people organize in order to perform such labor. In *The Wealth of Networks* Yochai Benkler defines a “commons” as an institutional form structuring the right to “access, use, and control resources” (76), and argues that:

*Commons are another core institutional component of freedom of action in free societies, but they are structured to enable action that is not based on exclusive control over the resources necessary for action...Each institutional framework—property and commons— allows for a certain freedom of action and a certain degree of predictability of access to resources. Their complementary coexistence and relative salience as institutional frameworks for action determine the relative reach of the market and the domain of nonmarket action, both individual and social, in the resources they govern and the activities that depend on access to those resources* (36)

He later goes on to write that, in the digital age, the expanded reach of digital networking technologies have allowed for a broader, wider commons which, in addition to affecting the nature of corporate labor, has also allowed for an increased opportunity for creative, collaborative, communal work conducted outside of traditional market spheres. This nonmarket market exists in parallel to structures of power, and the work conducted within this new network of communities is called “commons-based peer production” (56).

Commons-based and symbolic analytic work are categorized not so much by the nature of the labor itself, which will necessarily vary from instance to instance, but by the creative, analytical skills valued for its enacting and for the motivations of those who perform it. While such work may be (and
often is) extrinsically motivated when performed in corporate or workplace contexts, it is intrinsically valued when performed outside of the contexts of one’s job. This translates into the less-structured, more intrinsically motivated work often performed by participants in digital projects and communities. Of note in this new economy – which exists parallel to more traditional modes of power, labor, and capital, are the ways in which the same old acts of creative, analytic, technical, and expert labor are performed through a different set of tools and for a different kind of motive. When I discuss work, motivation, affordances, and valuation, therefore, I am focused on the post-industrial, labor discussed by Johnson-Eilola. The older models certainly exert powerful influence on the ways in which newer models of creative, analytical, and technical work may occur in crowdsourced projects, but this newer model of labor, I believe, functions most smoothly when it is able to take advantage of the constraints imposed by larger, strategic economic and cultural forces and twist and adapt them to suit the goals performed in less constrained, more creative communal efforts.

Of course, donating money to a charity is not exactly back-breaking labor, nor is it very creative by itself. It is still, however, a kind of symbolic analytic labor in the sense that it represents the exchange of time for some kind of intrinsically-valued gain. If capital is measured in terms of the investment of time and energy into the capitalist economy in exchange for money, then our money becomes a symbol which signifies the perceived value of our time. This, according to Kathleen Fitzpatrick, is quite literally true in online transactions. She argues that “the scarcities involved in Internet-based publishing are not material; they are, rather, shortages of time and attention” (453), specifically the time and attention of the audience. Considering these two ideas of labor and capital, we might view the donation of money online as a kind of symbolic analytic labor itself – the “costs of information expression and exchange” in nonmarket production, as Johnson-Eilola called it. Of special note are the motivations behind this unique method of labor. Benkler writes that commons based laborers “are typically motivated by intrinsic, personal motivations, making them more efficient in terms of creative production (The Wealth
of Networks, 115). In such social-transactional systems the key resources are human time, creativity, and attention (107), which, when one considers why people choose to invest in a crowdfunding project, reveals more about the values of a community and its members than about the value of any one project. While the motivation of workers and consumers may not be of any notable importance in prior models of labor, production, and valuation as Ordanini et al. argue, digital media have, owing to their affordances of (relatively) open accessibility and transparency, created a new, parallel kind of labor that exists alongside the older, more traditionally capitalistic models of production. They argue that “The idea that some people may decide to pay for producing and promoting a product (instead of buying it), and bear the risk associated with that decision, represents a further step in the evolution of consumers’ roles, that involves a mix of entrepreneurship and social network participation” (3). They later write that, per the “Lead User” theory of economics by von Hippel and “Open Innovation literature” by Chesbrough, in crowdfunding participation involves more than just consumption of a good or service. It also recasts customers as participants, who, more than just pre-ordering a product through an alternative service for purchasing, “help in developing an offering...that is later consumed by someone else”. They write:

Lead User theory (von Hippel, 1986) and Open Innovation literature (Chesbrough, 2003) do focus on customer involvement in developing new offerings intended for other customers at large. Both propose that some users have the ability to anticipate needs months or years before they are evident in the marketplace, and that firms can capitalize on such lead users sense of innovation and expertise in developing successful new products (von Hippel and Katz, 2002). However, although lead users reflect some characteristics of participants in crowdfunding initiatives (e.g., scouting and screening of ideas seeking funds), it should be noted that lead users are scarce and invariably only a few of them can be involved in innovation because of coordination constraints (Lilien et al., 2002). In contrast, another foundational trait of
crowdfunding models is that a relatively large number of people participated in deciding what
should be offered (8).

They later conclude that, in addition to information, knowledge, and labor, “in collective contexts such
as crowdfunding, consumers’ monetary funds and project-screening capabilities represent important
additional resources that trigger the service process and determine the extent of consumer
participation” and that consumers “become integrators of talent (of others), financial resources (their
own), and promotional efforts (through social networks) in their role as crowdfunding participants”
cementing their role as “co-creators of value” for a given project (32-33). Thus, in crowdfunding, the
“consumers” of a project are not mere recipients of a product at the end of its production, but
collaborative workers who, although their options for participation in a project’s development are
limited by the constraints of the medium, are nonetheless motivated less by the promise of a good or
service than by the opportunity to participate in the development of that thing. The nature of money,
too, differs from other consumer models in that it is not merely a symbol of valuation of labor but also
as a technology for “project-screening” and a means by which consumers can contribute to the
development of the project itself.

In addition to the more traditional compensation of performing symbolic analytic work, there is
also often another kind of online labor, where the primary compensation for the work is the work itself.
In Kickstand’s case, this value was measured either socially (in the form of a desire to help a friend) or
ethically (in the form of the desire to help save an animal’s life). Using digital technology for one’s own
creative, symbolic, socially based work is, essentially, a decentralized version of deCerteau’s concept of
“la perruque” where a laborer performs his own work using the spaces and tools provided by his
employer (The Practice of Everyday Life, 25). In the case of crowdfunding, however, this tactical work
does not necessarily involve direct participation in the development of any one project (although it
may). It may also, more commonly, simply mean using the funds earned through traditional, transactional labor (at one’s job for instance) to invest in a worthy project, in a sense re-appropriating the money one earns – itself a measure of the value of one’s time, labor, and skill in traditional capitalistic modes of labor – into a tool for the facilitation of projects that consumers believe in.

What is unique about the case of Kickstand lies in how the couple was able to raise the money itself through crowdfunding, as opposed to raising the money through a series of phone calls, emails, or door-to-door requests, is the way that the communities spread, heedless of the limitations and affordances we traditionally ascribe to the local. Using social media to make an “open call” for donations allows the intersections of identification to take on a kind of genealogical quality so common to online communities, where the “text” (in this case the fundraiser) itself undergoes a process of almost genealogical reproduction which Matthew Kirschenbaum calls “versioning.” In the case of Kickstand, the couple posted a link to the Kickstarter to help Kickstand. I donated and then posted a link to their link to help them help Kickstand. Any of my own friends in Washington who donated or reposted it did so out of a desire to help me help the couple help Kickstand, and so on. Although distilled throughout several iterations across vast geographical distance, the community, and more importantly the money it raised, was able to easily filter back into the “real” world, where the symbolic-analytic labor was exchanged for the vet’s physical labor. Symbolic labor produces real outcomes, and, as in this case, is often valued along intrinsic, personal, and social lines.

Indeed, Kickstarter.com, the largest and most popular of these crowdfunding services, writes in their charter that “Kickstarter’s mission is to help bring creative projects to life. We measure our success as a company by how well we achieve that mission, not by the size of our profits” and that “Kickstarter will create tools and resources that help people bring their creative projects to life, and that connect people around creative projects and the creative process” (Kickstarter.com Charter). This notion of
success as measured in communal, creative output, while likely little more than corporate lip-service
nevertheless reflects the “utopian”, “hacker” ethos that Alexander Galloway endorses as the internet’s
greatest strength. It is also a demonstration of that, as Benkler argues, commons-based work is,
although not unique to the digital, is greatly enhanced by its affordances:

Information and cultural production have three primary categories of inputs. The first is existing
information and culture. We already know that existing information is a nonrival good—that is,
its real marginal cost at any given moment is zero. The second major cost is that of the
mechanical means of sensing our environment, processing it, and communicating new
information goods. This is the high cost that typified the industrial model, and which has
drastically declined in computer networks. The third factor is human communicative capacity—
the creativity, experience, and cultural awareness necessary to take from the universe of existing
information and cultural resources and turn them into new insights, symbols, or representations
meaningful to others with whom we converse. Given the zero cost of existing information and
the declining cost of communication and processing, human capacity becomes the primary
scarce resource in the networked information economy (52).

In other words, human interest is the currency of the digital, and therefore the motivations of those
who contribute to crowdfunding initiatives are not charitable in the strict sense of the word. Nor,
however, are they entirely economical in that there is no monetary reward for successfully “backing” a
project. Instead, as I have argued, the economy is one of creative output and community-building
symbolic labor. It is inherently – although not universally – tactical.

The mission of crowdfunding, along with the technical affordances by which it allows authors to
reach out to “argue” for the value of their work, prevents it from becoming strategic simply because the
scale will not allow it. Crowdfunded projects typically reach out to smaller groups interested consumers
looking to participate in a specific community rather than large-scale investors looking for a profitable return. Crowdfunding investors “participate in crowdfunding websites because they like engaging in innovative behavior...these participants are attracted by the novel way to use the underlying technology platform, particularly in the context of social networking” (Ordanini et al., 22). Crowdfunding differs from grants in that the motivation of the audience does not stem from a social, academic, or financial stake in a project, but from personal interest: “the primary motivations of working consumers are intrinsic (‘for the fun of it’)...Extrinsic motivations such as the satisfaction of pursuing common goals or time savings are also relevant but appear to be less critical” (Kleemann et al., 22). And in order to succeed, a crowdfunding proposal must seek out an audience of participants with an interest in “building a community that ultimately enjoys additional private benefits from their participation” (Belleflamme et al., 27). Therefore, this study views crowdfunding as a technology not of fundraising but community-building, with money being a tool of persuasion – a way for these communities to push the development of texts along their preferred trajectories of development. To quote an old aphorism, “money talks”, which means that it is best studied from a rhetorical perspective. By analyzing the ways in which persuasion occurs online through the medium of crowdfunding, we can better understand how communities use the different rhetorical affordances available to them to determine the values of the texts which determine their values. We can also see how authors are both able to shape these values through their texts while simultaneously needing to shape their texts to suit these values. Finally, we can view how the complex power dynamics between author and audience, participant and producer, and collaborators and communities, take shape through a series of ongoing persuasive acts, where currencies of time, money, creativity, and reputation are bartered in order to shape that community’s formative texts.
Follow the Money?

The “funding” part of “crowdfunding” is perhaps less important than the “crowd.” This idea flies in the face of much of the scholarship concerning the practice. This is not so surprising, however. Cash is like a big neon sign along the side of the road; flashy, but impossible to ignore. Although still new even by the fast-paced standards of the internet, crowdfunding has received ample attention from academics and experts from a variety of disciplines. However, many scholars focus their analysis exclusively on an economic point of view, their studies constituting a series of “best practices” approaches for successfully using crowdfunding in business. Rather than delving into the mechanisms or potential social benefits of crowdfunding, they seek to perform a kind of rhetorical alchemy; what are the magic words we need to say to get money to appear? Even more comprehensive studies of crowdfunding frame it strictly in terms of how it will affect the future of market capitalism, insistently trying to push it and mash it into a familiar shape rather than examining the newer dimensions it exposes. Ethan Molick, in attempting to narrow the definition of crowdfunding writes that “Crowdfunding refers to the efforts by entrepreneurial individuals and groups – cultural, social, and for-profit – to fund their ventures by drawing on relatively small contributions from a relatively large number of individuals using the internet, without standard financial intermediaries” (“The Dynamics of Crowdfunding”, 1). For those interested in the economic side, like Molick, crowdfunding is an anomaly of the business world, a force that speaks to the ways in which the internet can potentially alter the ways that people buy, sell, and publish ideas online. Molick writes:

[S]ince crowdfunding is novel and potentially disruptive to traditional approaches to funding, there are three research areas that should be of interest to entrepreneurship scholars. First, it is important to understand whether crowdfunding successes and failures are driven by the same underlying dynamic as other forms of entrepreneurial investment — that is, does the crowd fund
projects that signal potential quality, or is some less rational selection system at work? Second, since a salient feature of crowdfunding compared to other funding methods is the removal of geographic limitations...it is important to understand what role, if any, geography continues to play in new ventures in a crowdfunding regime. Finally, it is critical to understand if crowdfunding “works:” do crowdfunded projects actually deliver results? (2).

Although these questions are indeed of value, especially to economics and business scholars, reducing the importance of crowdfunding to the study of monetary impacts risks limiting perspective on it, narrowing our ideas of what it can or cannot do based on older, pre-digital ideologies. In “Extreme Usability”, Bradley Dilger writes that, all too often, studies about emergent technologies and techniques for their operation fall into the trap of “extreme usability”, which he defines as follows:

Practitioners of extreme usability repeatedly invoke ease...in their definition of usability. This is no accident: extreme usability is, in fact, usability made easy, a simplified usability profoundly and problematically distinct from the robust, more carefully developed concepts of usability from which it was derived (Location 690).

Dilger argues that extreme usability “extends the ideological framework of ease... Like ease, extreme usability encourages an out-of-pocket rejection of difficulty and complexity, displaces agency and control to external experts, and represses critique and critical use of technology in the name of productivity and efficiency” (751). In short an overemphasis on ease of use leads to relentlessly pragmatic thinking, which cannot be disrupted because complications are not pragmatic. In viewing crowdfunding solely in terms of its relation to traditionally understood structures such as economy, geography and efficacy, we play into this danger of extreme usability, and narrow our options not just for how we talk about crowdfunding, but what we can say when talking about it. Given the myriad potential uses for such small-scale investment outside of mere fundraising for corporate-style
production, Molick’s hyperfocus on the best practices, while helpful to potential users of crowdfunding, leave out the all-important human factor. Again, as Dilger writes, “if the intent of usability is the development of user-centered technological systems and practices of communication, then despite its difficulty, we need to engage culture” (Location 900).

This is, of course, easier said than done. Where some view crowdfunding strictly in terms of economics, others have analyzed it as a potential venue for activism or social change. In his Oxford Master’s thesis, Rodrigo Davies writes:

> *While building on the long history of community-led fundraising for civic projects, the platform model of crowdfunding has proven to be scalable and globally adaptable in a way that many previous forms have not. This scalability and adaptability suggests crowdfunding should not simply be regarded as an extension of established fundraising practices but rather that it can be understood as a new socio-technical infrastructure... crowdfunding could be said to provide a context, or occasion, for communities to request money for projects as well as an established process for how to do so... the infrastructure of crowdfunding has come to embody and develop conventions and communities of practice that influence its future development... in the case of crowdfunding, [master narratives] speak directly to incumbent infrastructures: campaigners tend to be seen as entrepreneurs engaged in a personal struggle for resources in the face of indifferent institutions (traditional funding sources such as banks, record labels or film studios).* (42-43).

Similarly, Kim et al. write that “academic research on crowdfunding has largely neglected this important question of whether and how crowdfunding helps in democratizing access to capital. What would the democratization of access to capital look like? We could say that crowdfunding contributes to democratizing access to capital if it provides a new channel of capital to individuals and small businesses...
that have promising ideas but have difficulty initiating them with traditional sources of financing” (2).

And, in examining the political economies of crowdfunding, Ryan Safner chastises the emphasis many scholars place on funding to the exclusion of its possibilities for activism:

> In general, what is needed is an explanation of how an institutional arrangement such as crowdfunding emerges and functions in contrast to existing rules of intellectual property. Furthermore, since many scholars have expressed concerns with the current regime of intellectual property laws, we need a wider exploration of the alternative institutions that might provide expressive works under different regimes of intellectual property, including the absence of any at all (3).

Taken together, we can see a picture of crowdfunding scholarship emerge: Many who study this new mode for fundraising concern themselves primarily with outcomes. Even those who, rather than monetary outcomes, consider questions of audience and place, are still fixated on the currencies of crowdfunding – which I will argue are little more than technologies for the facilitating of the creative process - essentially trading one flavor of capital (money) for another (intellectual/social). Although the currency of social change is perhaps more valuable to the humanities than others, it is still a currency, and analyzing just the “funding” side elides what truly matters; the “crowd”.

Not only does this emphasis on outcomes obfuscate the study of crowdfunding on its own merits, it is, by and large, doomed to fail even by its own standards of importance. Deirdre McClosky writes in *The Rhetoric of Economics* that the great failure of modernist economics is in the presumption that it is more “scientific” than the study of rhetoric due to its predictive abilities, which, as she argues, are not even particularly effective themselves:

> The common claim that prediction is the defining feature of a real science, and that economics possesses the feature, is also doubtful. It is a cliche among philosophers and historians of
science, for instance, that one of the most successful of all scientific theories, the theory of
evolution, makes no predictions and is therefore unfalsifiable by prediction...It is at least
suggestive of something strange in prediction as a criterion for a properly modernist economics
that Darwin’s theory was itself connected to the classical economics of Smith, Malthus, and
Ricardo (a system, as it happens, erroneous in most of the actual predictions it made) (150).

In other words, any effort to predict if crowdfunding “works” from an economic standpoint is, as is the
case with any predictive study of economics, unreliable. Moreover, such hyper-focus ignores the
rhetorical, contextual, and cultural influences and exertions that are able to uniquely influence one
another in the instance of this particular technology. As McClosky argues, the standards for quantitative
statements have to be rhetorical, because they are measured against our human experiences (109). The
considerations of geography, ownership, and digital ubiquity all attempt to commodify crowdfunding
and render some kind of predictive model. As I will demonstrate in later chapters, this is an all but futile
exercise, as even projects that by every right should succeed may fail and vice versa. By viewing
crowdfunding as a singular, isolated example of online discourse, we miss the larger implications it holds
for the very act of persuasion online and to important questions of authorship, authority, and
collaboration in the digital space. And by tethering the study of crowdfunding to specific, static
communities drawn along lines of geography or social media connectivity, we are only getting a limited
picture of the ways in which digital modalities affect the very acts of constructing identity, community,
and texts on and offline.

These methods of examining crowdfunding, although more focused on the human side of the
equation, all fall into the same trap as Molick. Namely, they view crowdfunding as a subset of a larger
something. For Molick, that something is entrepreneurship. For others, it is anything from geography to
infrastructure, to publishing and copyright concerns. While all important considerations, what is missing
from studies of crowdfunding is, simply, what it says about the bigger picture with regards to the ways in which communities are formed, technologies of meaning-making are mediated and remediated along the lines of cultural and technical affordances, and how even notions of authorship and labor are affected by the varying, ever-changing shape of the rhetorical situation. Crowdfunding is not, I will argue, a new and revolutionary system of publication and authorship. Nor, however, is it a mere remediation of pre-existing infrastructures. It is instead a series of protocols, specific to what I will call the “Digital Local”, but at the same time reflective of other, timeless protocols of human persuasion, authorship, community building, and the construction of individual identity.

The Values of Values

How, then, do we measure the value of crowdfunding - both in terms of its individual projects and its overall rhetorical situations? Money does, after all, still account for most of the interest afforded to the new technology. Although Crowdfunding uses currency to help support projects as any traditional, capitalist investor might, the ways in which money is leveraged as a persuasive force differs in that it is not used to affect space, but time. The “place” of a crowdsourced community is established prior to the arrival of what Kleemann and Voss call “working consumers” through the reputation of the author of a creative project. A working consumer, they write, represents a shift – facilitated by digital technologies – in the role played by the consumer with relation to the products, services, and ideas generated by their communities. Kleemann and Voss write that “The current notion of consumers arose in conjunction with industrialization and is characterized by the act of consuming as opposed to the act of work. In its place we may see a new, hybrid figure arise – that of the ‘working consumer’” which they define by three characteristics, first is that they are “active in the production process and can be utilized as value-adding workers” second that “the capacities they possess are valuable economic assets” and finally “they are systematically integrated into corporate structures, where their actions can be
monitored and manipulated by corporate managers much as if they were employees” (8-9). Although this definition is highly critical of the practice, and it focuses on crowdsourcing without considering the role of crowdfunding, it does illustrate a key difference in the role of labor and those who perform it in the digital age, namely that consumption, investment, and work are no longer discreet acts on the part of community members, but a series of interacting technical, rhetorical, and social moves with the product representing a rallying point rather than a finish line.

The ways in which these working consumers navigate this landscape is rooted in the values, discursive norms, and, most of all, the protocols of their communities. In turn, these acts of labor, production, and consumption are facilitated by technologies of persuasion, not only the digital media on which these acts occur, but even the broader technologies of “money”, “place”, and “time.” On Kickstarter money is used to influence the ways in which that author’s time is used, the better to generate new texts that fit the needs and values of a given community. It is, in this way, an inversion of the traditional investment model, and one that is highly rooted in Galloway’s concepts of protocol. “Protocol”, he writes, “is synonymous with possibility. From the perspective of protocol, if you can do it, it can’t be bad, because if it were bad, then it would have been outlawed years ago by protocol” (167) and that the vision of the maker movement, and of “hackers”, is founded in the idea of using these protocols to achieve utopian ends. He writes that the “relationship between utopia and possibility is a close one. It is necessary to know what one wants, to know what is possible to want, before a true utopia may be envisioned...One of the most important signs of this utopian instinct is the hacking community’s anti-commercial bent. Software products have long been developed and released into the public domain, with seemingly no profit motive on the side of the authors, simply for the higher glory of the code itself” (168-169). He continues:
However, greater than this anti-commercialism is a pro-protocolism. Protocol, by definition, is open source...protocol is nothing but an elaborate instruction list of how a given technology should work...a true protocol cannot be closed or proprietary. It must be paraded into full view before all, and agreed to by all. It benefits over time through its own technological development in the public sphere (171).

This is what crowdfunding offers: A pro-protocolistic set of possibilities, where the necessary consensus for the generation of texts is achieved through a very literal kind of “voting with your wallet.” Although this interpretation seemingly contradicts Galloway’s characterization of protocols in online spaces as being inherently anti-commercial, I argue that, as a technology for valuation, the symbolic and social function of money can change depending on the medium in which it is used. Money is, after all, a symbolic representation of the value of labor, and is therefore, like all symbols, subject to the ever-changing contexts of the rhetorical situation. Consigny, in his definition of rhetorical situations, argues that all rhetorical events come down to how interlocutors make use of what he calls topics, defined as “a formal opposition of two (or more) terms which can be used to structure the heteronomous pattern of a particular situation” (182). He argues that, rather than being “free-floating”, topics represent an art where the “interplay...between devices and situation requires both a formal and material constraint for effective discovery and management” (184).

In other words, all rhetorical situations make use of different persuasive tools, and just as these tools define the rhetorical situations in which they are used, the situations must also define the ways in which the tools may be effectively employed. As one of these tools for persuasion, money – and the act of spending money, which, as I will argue later, is made all the more rhetorical significant online for how transparent this act is – may take on different or additional symbolic meanings and functions depending on the rhetorical situation. In the case of crowdfunding, the act of investing (or not investing) money is,
in addition to being a means by which market value is assigned to a project, an effective form of symbolic shorthand through which communities voice their opinions on a proposed text or artifact. On Kickstarter, choosing to invest – or to not invest – in a project is not an act of individual consumption, but a rhetorical move designed to encourage the discursive traits of some texts and discourage the traits of others. More than that, because sites like Kickstarter show how much money a proposed project has raised and from how many investors for all to see, the very act of adding to this “total” carries with it its own persuasive force. In other words, it becomes another kind of protocol of persuasion, made in “full view” for the community to consider. While the authors of a crowdfunding pitch seek to make money from their projects, the people who respond to the open call and contribute are carrying out their own truly protocological work, each investment shaping the possibilities of the community into which the would-be authors of a crowdfunded text must enter. Therefore, where many center the study of crowdfunding around the money raised or the projects themselves, I will focus instead on the ways in which the members of the community use the service to assert their own shared vision of their community, and, further, of the world. The “crowd” is at the center of crowdfunding, and their creative work is just as important as that of the authors who use the service. The “crowd” is the true function of this technology, and, as with any technology, the success of it is measured in terms of its ability to facilitate the realization of an established end.

I wish to argue through this study that new technologies, such as crowdfunding, although not inherently transformative, are always rhetorical, and therefore represent the creation of new rhetorical situations. I wish to argue that by analyzing the affordances new technologies allow and the ways in which these affordances constrain or allow different genres of speech acts to take place, we can further shape our understanding of such prominent, metaphysical concepts. Whether any one technology is truly transformative is less relevant than what happens to the rhetorical situation when it’s adopted for widespread use. Andrew Feenberg writes that the development and normalization of technical objects is
mediated by what he calls their “technical code”, which “responds to the cultural horizon of the society at the level of technical design...technical parameters such as the choice and processing of materials are socially specified by the code” (660) and, in “Questioning Technology”, writes that a more productive way to study questions of technical essentialism and determinism is using the relationship between the technically functional and the social, or, as Simondon calls it “Concretization.” “Concretization”, Feenberg writes, “is the discovery of synergisms between the functions technologies serve and between technologies and their environments...the functionalization of the object is reconciled with wider contextual considerations through a special type of technical development”, the study of which describes “a complex trajectory of progress, richer than simple growth” (217-218). He concludes that viewing technology along such lines allows for us to identify (and see to) a type of development that is “both technically and normatively progressive” (220).

I will examine crowdfunding along these “concretizing” lines of synergy between the technical affordances of the service (who is able to raise money, to what ends do they raise this money, how much money, what persuasive techniques do they use to do so, how do the technical affordances of the internet allow them to do so in ways that they otherwise couldn’t) and the contextual considerations that helped shape the technology in the first place (community, audience, culture, authorship). We cannot predict if, or why, a pitch will “work”, but we can examine those that do in order to better understand the mechanisms of persuasion behind each dollar donated. Crowdfunding, I will argue, is like any technology in that it gives us a new set of tools for persuasion, labor, and community-building. And the ways in which authors and audiences use those tools, shaping and being shaped by them as they go, may reveal interesting insights into long-standing questions about writing, rhetoric, authorship, and authority. In short, crowdfunding, as a technology of persuasion that relies upon two other technologies of persuasion, offers unique insights into the nature of both. It does not only do this, though; it is also a medium for the formation of community. With each new pitch video, a micro-
community forms, each with its own affordances, norms, values, and persuasive acts. By studying the
genealogy of these communities and tracing how they form within larger, interconnected rhizomatic
groupings, also occurring within crowdfunding, we can see, again and again, how we use technologies of
persuasion to construct communities which construct texts which construct ourselves.

**Chapter Breakdown**

This study will analyze crowdfunded projects from the website Kickstarter.com. My research will
focus primarily on Kickstarter.com instead of other crowdfunding services for a handful of reasons. First,
it is the most popular and well-known, and thus has the most immediate, measurable impact. Second,
its projects are limited in both the time and money the authors are allowed to ask for. These restrictions
provide a useful framework by which to measure the success – and degrees of success – within the
genre. A project is either funded or it is not. Moreover, because these projects are time limited they
must not only generate interest, but must also spread through word of mouth in a very short timeframe.
This demands the active participation of the community, which, I will argue, complicates the power
dynamic between author and audience. Finally, Kickstarter has become a kind of community itself,
where the authors of crowdfunded projects will communicate with, recommend, and collaborate with
other projects. This creates a system of interrelated discourse communities which shares characteristics
with the concept of the “distributed network”, which, according to Alexander Galloway, is a “complex of
interrelated currents and counter-currents” (*Protocol*, Location 2313). His metaphor of the internet as a
“complex” is, I believe, a highly useful one. Rather than viewing crowdfunding sites as texts or as
technical artifacts, my intent is to define them as “places”. Like the Greek forum or the modern
academy, each crowdfunded project is a place where space, time, and community create context for
persuasive acts. These places are self-contained on one level, but on the other are interconnected to
one another by overlapping layers of shared language, culture, interest, and audience Focusing
specifically on Kickstarter provides a useful lens through which to view these questions of online 
authorship and value for one simple reason: a project’s success can be quantified. Unlike other 
crowdfunding services, Kickstarter projects are assigned a level of monetary value at their inception in 
the form of a funding goal. The author (or authors) must declare how much money is needed to create a 
project in advance, in effect offering their estimation of its value for the audience’s consideration. If the 
donations to a project do not equal or surpass this number, the authors receive no funding and the 
project is either cancelled, or re-valued on subsequent attempts. If the figure is exceeded, the author 
must also assign “stretch goals”, effectively pre-determining how funding in excess of the original 
approximation can add to the project. In effect, this creates a low-stakes environment through which 
author and audience negotiate both the value of a text, and the shape that the text will shape should it 
be funded.

In order to analyze these “pitch videos”, one aspect of the “open call” meant to draw interest 
from a community, I will be employing a methodological subset of discourse analysis that Upton and 
Cohen call “move analysis”, which they define as a type of “corpus based discourse study...a 
methodology that is used to analyze texts in terms of the functional/communicative structures that 
typically make up texts in a genre: move analysis” (585). This method combines both quantitative, 
electronically assisted language analysis, and qualitative study of the genre’s characteristics in order to 
define and classify successful samples. They argue that “a corpus-based approach requires analysis of a 
well-designed ‘representative collection of texts of a particular genre. These texts are encoded 
electronically, allowing for more complex and generalizable research findings, revealing linguistic 
patterns and frequency information that would otherwise be too labor intensive to uncover by 
hand...the moves and move types in each text must first be identified and tagged individually by the 
researchers making qualitative judgments about the communicative purposes of the different parts of a 
text; and even once quantitative data are run, the results must still be interpreted functionally” (600).
I will rely on a focused, qualitative analysis of what Frow calls “prototypical” texts of a genre (Genre, 38). These prototypical texts, the “genus” of a genre or subgenre, will form the foundation of a larger-scale linguistic analysis of a wider corpus of texts, which will enable us to demonstrate the ways in which communities take shape around texts, and, as the process of versioning allows for more and more texts to be generated within the guidelines set by the prototypical texts, establish sets of values and protocols which decide the possibilities within a particular group; namely, which texts will “succeed” in drawing the aura needed to be funded, and which will fail and why. I will also analyze and describe relevant passages transcribed from the videos before examining how these authors both distance their work from traditional models of publication and, as the same time, demonstrate the level of competence and cultural capital expected of their audience – traits that were previously given, as if from on high, by the copyright holders who “owned” or published texts. In an effort to examine the idea of a “text” through a multimodal lens, and to demonstrate how, as Kirschenbaum argues, the digital is both local and material, I have selected my corpus from a variety of different genres. Subsequent chapters will expand the parameters of my analysis, shift focus to a more quantitative style of linguistics analysis, and contrast my findings and the findings of other, similar studies against the persuasive, rhetorical, and linguistic moves of failed projects.

Before delving into the analysis of the videos themselves, however, it is important to define what, exactly I am looking for and to examine the ways in which my analysis differs from economical or structural studies of crowdfunding. Although I will be providing qualitative analysis of the text from several videos, both from a small prototypical sample set which I will analyze rheotically and a larger corpus which will serve for a more quantitative sampling of what distinguishes a “good” video from a “bad” one, I must stress that this is not a “How to guide” for best practices. Nor is it an endorsement (or denunciation) of crowdfunding as a medium for communication. Instead, I will be using crowdfunding as a means to view the ways that communities form online, the ways that authors barter social capital for
monetary capital, and the ways that different technologies of persuasion, including digital texts and even money itself, affect the power dynamics inherent to authorship, publication, and community building. To do this, I will be framing my study of crowdfunding not in terms of the technology it appears on, but as if it were another manifestation of the rhetorical situation. I call this manifestation of online, community-building acts of rhetoric “The Digital Local.”

Chapter Two, therefore, will be an effort to define “The Digital Local” using theories set down by scholars like Kenneth Burke, Lloyd Bitzer, Michele deCerteau and Alexander Galloway. From Bitzer, I take the basic definition of “The Rhetorical Situation” as a sequence of prior circumstances that give rise to rhetorical goals, limitations, and affordances that shape the ways in which we use persuasion. I also draw upon Vatz’s critique of Bitzer to expand my own study of the Rhetorical Situation to include the ways in which rhetoric can shape a place even as it is shaped by it. Burke’s concepts of identification and division allow me to expand this from places and circumstances to people, the better to show how identity is constructed through the communities that we identify with and the texts that shape the form of those communities. Others, like Benjamin, Lyotard, and Latour and Lowe, allow me to further delve into the complex relationships between place, community, identity, and persuasion. This, in turn, through the lens of deCerteau, will examine how power is both imposed on and negotiated within such rhetorical situations. Finally, Galloway and other technology scholars will help me demonstrate how these dynamics apply online, and how, although the affordances of the digital are new and full of possibilities, they are not so different in their essential form from any technology of persuasion.

Having defined the Digital Local, Chapter Three will then shift to examine crowdfunding – Kickstarter specifically – as a powerful manifestation of the Digital Local. In this chapter, I will build a framework for study using five Prototypical Texts from the genre. I have chosen my prototypical texts based on a variety of factors. First, they must be successful, meaning that, per Kickstarter’s policy, they
met or exceeded their stated funding goal. Second, they must be “Auratic,” defined, in this sense, along the twin lines etched by Latour and Lowe and Matthew Kirschenbaum; they must have progeny, whether in terms of inspiring new texts or the process of remixing and re-versioning. Third, and perhaps most importantly, they must, in the text of the pitch video themselves, demonstrate linguistic, rhetorical, stylistic, and generic traits that define subsequent entries into their genre. Kickstarter videos, and indeed, crowdfunding open calls as a whole, may be viewed as a “metagenre”, which “signifies a higher category, a genre of genres...a metagenre, then, directs our attention to broader patterns of language as social action, similar kinds of typified responses to related recurrent situations...just as the genre is a dynamic concept, representing a response to a rhetorical situation that both defines and is defined by the situation, a metagenre is also dynamic...a metagenre indicates a structure of similar ways of doing that point to similar ways of writing and knowing” (Ways of Knowing, Doing, and Writing, 393).

The importance of metagenre lies not in understanding how a genre works, but the ways in which these structures inform how adherents to a discipline (or, in the case of this study, the members of a community) use their texts to understand and reproduce their means of knowledge making (407). My prototypical texts, then, while falling under the wider metagrenre of crowdfunding pitches, will be categorized in terms of the subgenres within this larger metagenre. The traits of these subgenres may be analyzed and defined in terms of what constitutes a meaningful or sensical text within the discourse community. Bhatia writes that genres “display constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value...it is possible for a specialist to exploit the rules and conventions of a genre in order to achieve special effects or private intentions...but s/he cannot break away from such constraints completely” (14). The prototypical texts I have chosen define the parameters of these constraints through various metrics of success, timing, and reputation. Texts that exist within the same genres or metagenres may still, according to Bhatia, demonstrate “significantly different strategies” in which case “It is best to regard them as two subgenres of the same genre”:
The communicative purpose is inevitably reflected in the interpretative cognitive structuring of the genre, which, in a way, represents the typical regularities of organization in it. These regularities...reflect strategies that members of a particular discourse or professional community typically use in the construction and understanding of that genre to achieve specific communicative purposes. This cognitive structuring reflects accumulated and conventionalized social knowledge available to a particular discourse or professional community (21).

The prototypical texts presented in chapter three set the terms for their antecedents by paving the way for rhetorical success using different persuasive styles and flourishes that may not necessarily work for other subgenres, despite being hosted under the wider umbrella of crowdfunding pitches as a metagenre. In short, these prototypes are profitable, inspiring, and innovative. The five categories of subgenre, and the parameters which define them as distinct from one another, will be introduced in the chapter, and will establish both the framework for more detailed analysis of the genres and subgenres of crowdfunding, and, more importantly, the ways that authors use these genre characteristics to negotiate their position within their discourse communities.

Chapter four will build on the findings presented in three by examining the findings of other studies conducted about the lexical, grammatical, and monetary data of crowdfunding. Essentially, this chapter will show how the legacy of the prototype pitches inform and shape the rhetorical situations in which their antecedents come to be. This analysis will account for the linguistic patterns of these categories, although not in order to outline best practices. Instead, this study of the lexical and rhetorical genomes of these pitch videos will further illustrate how, even as texts shape the geography of the digital local, they are also, by necessities imposed through funding (or not funding) key projects, shaped by the communities to which they seek to belong. This, perhaps more than anything else, will demonstrate the tactical power of those within different discourse communities as participant and
audience rather than author. Finally, this chapter will examine the “outliers” of the crowdfunding world, including failed pitches, controversial projects, and parody. This last category will examine how genre and discourse awareness, more than the content of the videos or projects, determines success in crowdfunding (and, I will argue, all rhetorical situations) by contrasting the famously lucrative “Potato Salad” Kickstarter pitch with other more ambitious (but less successful) projects.

Chapter Five will conclude my study by examining the ways that crowdfunding may be used by scholars and teachers within the humanities. While this chapter will, briefly, delve into the dreaded best practices so strenuously avoided in previous chapters, the focus is less on cheerleading for crowdfunding as a teaching tool and more about finding ways for teachers and scholars to use digital texts in the classroom without, as I will argue so many well-meaning multimodal course projects do, intruding on their private online communities. The Digital Local is as much a place as any physical space our students may inhabit, and should, therefore, be approached carefully, and with respect for our students’ own boundaries, interests, and knowledge about those places. We would, after all, not intrude on our students’ private dorm rooms or parties no matter how many teachable moments we might find in doing so; nor should we butt in to their personal online places either. However, there are still plenty of avenues to explore the digital rhetorics without such intrusions, and ways to do so that will provide students with learning outcomes that are not only socially and rhetorically significant, but will be of immediate personal utility to even the most reticent of student writers. Crowdfunding depends upon mutual interest between an author and a community of audiences. This interest is rarely created from nothing, but is, instead, pre-determined by countless social and communal identifications. This chapter will conclude my study by discussing how we might use that to show students how their interests and their communities are not separate from their development as authors and experts, but are instead rhetorical tools by which they can reshape their own identities.
CHAPTER TWO

The Digital Local

In the digital age, the word “text” is a loaded one. To the writer, it conjures images of a blinking black cursor on an infuriatingly white backdrop. To a scholar, it signifies a complex interaction of meaning, modality, and materiality. To people with smart phones, it’s a verb. As the ubiquity of digital technologies has grown, so too has the presence of texts. In online spaces, the relationship between author, reader and community becomes obscured with very real consequences regarding copyright, ownership, and the perceived authenticity for digital texts. All too often, however, the ways in which people conceive of the digital define “online” as something distinct from the “real.” What, exactly, that means depends on who you ask; for some this mysteriously ephemeral “online” represents an incoming (or ongoing) shift in the very nature of human interaction. For others, it’s merely the latest fad, another gimmicky, if useful, medium for the same old power structures to assert and reassert themselves. Regardless, the digital is too-often seen as something distinct. Something apart. The questions we ask about this other thing tend to, as a result, revolve around its uses, and whether it will liberate or constrain, change or reify.

It is important, however, to remember that the digital and its effects on our communities are by no means restricted to some distinct, otherworldly digital realm; to ignore space is, in fact, to ignore how texts create place, and that place itself is less a tangible, physical thing than it is an ongoing rhetorical act. This is true for digital texts as well. All texts, even those delivered through digital media, exist in physical, tangible space within the world. More than that, however, is the important, albeit counter-intuitive fact that texts not only exist within, but can create, places. In order to examine the ways in which identity, authorship, and community work online, then, it is crucial that we first understand what space, place, and community are on the internet as well as the ways in which texts –
from published works to forum posts – can alter them. We must redefine what we think of when we discuss the local, and work to understand authors not merely as the scribes of a text, but as the architects of place.

The great benefit of studying digital texts, then, is in their permanence. Online, texts are not only stored more safely than their tangible counterparts, many of them contain accessible lineages, through which we can examine the ways in which a text is born, evolves, and is influenced by the author and community alike. In examining online cultural artifacts, therefore, we are not just archiving creative works, but mapping the spread of communities through the cultural artifacts, the texts, that they produce. We are, in effect, watching the formation of new locals; a remixing of what it means to participate in “place”, and a reimagining – or, more properly, a “Remediation” – of how we employ technologies of persuasion and meaning making to create and re-create the values, authorship, authority, and norms of our communities, and the texts which exist at the center of those communities.

The local is rhetorical. More than that, the local is textual. Traditionally we define the idea of “local” along lines of “location”. One need only go to a new city to see the relationship; the “locals” guard the knowledge of the best restaurants, attractions, and other everyday secrets jealously, necessitating either introduction by a member of the tribe or a particularly savvy understanding of YELP reviews. Location, however, is not the only means by which the local can be defined. It is, in fact, the least important aspect. Local is not locale; it is, instead, a community organized around certain affordances that are contingent on aspects of space and time. Michel de Certeau makes critical distinctions between “space” and “place”, arguing that both are tied to the systems of power, knowledge, and meaning-making that creates them. He writes that systems of power attempt to impose their narratives of thought and action on the people trapped within who, in kind, strive to express their own voices using the toolset afforded to them by the systems in which they were born. He defines these
conflicting actions as “strategic” or “tactical”, writing that strategy is “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that become possible as soon as a subject with will and power...can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats...can be managed...every ‘strategic’ rationalization seeks first of all to distinguish its ‘own’ place...from an ‘environment’”, and describes the power of knowledge, on one level, as the ability to transform the uncertainties of history into readable spaces. (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 35-36). A tactic, on the other hand, “is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus...it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power...it takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them...it must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers...in short, a tactic is the art of the weak” (37). To deCerteau, “a place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence... an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability”. Space, in contrast, is “composed of intersections of mobile elements" (117) or the area in which certain materials allow for the creation of places.

Place, in this definition, is barely dependent on the physical, spatial, or geographic traits at all. These are merely affordances which affect how and what places may develop, and who may easily participate. In this view, a room is just as much of a place as an ongoing correspondence over the phone or internet. The key to mapping these places, then, is not in their locale, but in the ways that they allow for, and constrain, the creation of identity for those who dwell within, the process of which is, after all, rhetorical. In *A Rhetoric of Motives* Kenneth Burke writes that, more than just the use of the available means of persuasion, rhetoric represents the artistic use of identification to induce cooperation. For persuasion to take place, the audience must first see itself as sharing goals, characteristics, and beliefs with the interlocutor. This is done, primarily, through the use of symbols, including both the linguistic and the visual. To Burke, a person “may identify himself with [social] bodies or movements, largely
through sympathetic attitudes of his own” and defining this as “identification” concludes that “one’s notion of his personal identity may involve identification not just with mankind or the world in general, but by some kind of congregation that also implies some related norms of differentiation or segregation” (268). Identification is locally organized around sympathetic groups, who produce texts to codify and reify their behavioral and linguistic norms.

Where before communities could be easily traced along political, geographic, and institutional lines, the rise of globalization and the internet has altered the ways in which people organize and define themselves. While nations and corporations still retain most of the power to legitimate and produce texts, the internet has created a space where communities can form around shared interests with altered (though not necessarily negligible) emphasis on concerns of distance, language, and embodiment. Because of this, the means by which these interests are conveyed – through texts produced, disseminated among, consumed by, and then remixed by the disparate but interconnected communities online – contain not only samples of the language and narrative norms used by members of those communities, but the very seeds of those values through which the lines of those communities are drawn. This has always been the case – texts, orality, stories, and so on all reflect and produce ideologies – but online places offer increased transparency of the processes by which these texts are produced even as they blur the lines of what it means to be an author and a member of the audience. Ridolfo and DeVoss argue that the formulation of texts, especially online, is rooted in what they call the “Rhetorical Velocity” of a text. They define this as “a conscious rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time, pertaining specifically to theorizing instances of strategic appropriation by a third party.” They argue that, more than just examining a text as a self-contained artifact produced by a single author one must also consider the affordances for the delivery, distribution, consumption, production, and reproduction of the text with a conscious awareness of who will be receiving it at the end of – and
throughout – the process of composition and publication. This is especially true online, and in discussing how rhetorical practices in the digital age differ from older models they write:

In our day, writing often requires composers to draw upon multiple modes of meaning-making. Computers and robust networks allow writers to choreograph audio, video, other visual elements, text, and more. Writers engage in taking the old and making new. Appropriating words and images. Taking pieces, splicing ideas, compiling fragments. Transforming existing work. Transformation occurs when the rhetor delivers a text into a new context.

Indeed, this process of contextualization and re-contextualization through the processes of composing and disseminating texts extends even beyond the text itself and into the communities meant to receive those texts. And, rather than being merely passive endpoints for a text’s journey, the digital has offered those same communities new opportunities to re-appropriate, remix, critique, or support those texts, engaging in a cultural dialogue about the very tools which shape the values people use to define themselves. Digital texts have, after all, less “time” and “distance” to go in order to reach a new place than those artifacts restricted to crossing of geographical and special distances. And although digital texts are no less material than their analogue counterparts, the true material impacts lie in their persuasive force, and the ability they contain to shape the rhetorical situations – now linked more by interest and identification of interpersonal values than ever before – into which they obtain.

The “Local”, in other words, ain’t what it used to be. Communities are evermore fluid, temporary, and interactive, owing in large part to the new, different affordances enabled by digital technologies. How these communities are shaped, then, is the biggest change that the internet has brought about. What hasn’t changed, however, is the fluid, ongoing struggle between the interests represented within and around different types of communities; those which are strategic, and therefore
made to create places, or those that are tactical and must move within these pre-established arenas. To effectively study online rhetoric, and through it the ways in which texts shape communities, and the identities of those within, we must first examine the ways in which power and persuasion are used to both create and to navigate place. For deCerteau, we all exist within places imposed on us by the powers that be; digital or not is irrelevant. How we use our time within those spaces, hopefully towards our own individual ends, is the real question. Similarly, in Protocol Galloway writes that online identity is embodied in measurable ways. This measurement, called collaborative filtering, is “an extreme example of protocological organization of real human people. Personal identity is formed only on certain hegemonic patterns...the user is always suggested to be like someone else, who, in order for the system to work, is already like the user to begin with (Location 1951). Later, he argues, “protocol gives us the ability to build a ‘warm, friendly’ technological space...through technical standardization, agreement, organized implementation, broad...adoption, and directed participation” (Location, 2304). Online, Galloway argues, we gather into pre-existing places but may, within those places, modify, remix, and reconstruct them to suit our own, tactical needs. What these needs are is not universal, but is instead fundamentally defined by “local” concerns, which are, themselves, dictated by the values shared by the community existing within those places.

People on the internet tend to be grouped into communities by shared interests and goals, and communicate with these communities along standardized networks of etiquette, language, and technology. The locus of these small communities becomes, in effect, persuasive artifacts; texts which draw persistent interest, being returned to by groups of people for perusal and discussion over and over again, with the identifying characteristics of the group being defined along ideological lines. All of which is contingent on place, and none of which is contingent on space. For the purposes of my analysis, I call this notion of online “places” the “Digital Local”. Rather than referring to any one site or online service, the Digital Local may be viewed instead as a picture of the ways in which communities form, disperse,
and are navigated online. It may also account for the ways in which these differ from their material, geographically situated counterparts. In many – perhaps most – cases, there isn’t much difference at all between the formation of online communities when compared to those in the “real world”, in which case these places may be viewed merely as what Bolter and Grusin call “remediations” of other, more traditional modalities. In remediations, “the content of any medium is always another medium…the electronic medium is not set in opposition to painting, photography, or printing; instead the computer is offered as a new means of gaining access to these older materials…the electronic version justifies itself by granting access to the older media” (Remediation, 45). In this view, there is nothing terribly new about digital media, as, even when older devices and artifacts are phased out of circulation, “the very act of remediation...ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced” (47). In these remediated places, communities form much as they would anywhere else. Social media services such as Facebook, for instance, may be viewed as a remediated local space, with social groups forming along identifications such as personal history, geographic location, or prior interactions in the “real world”. This does not mean, however, that digital communities are merely remediations of what we already know. While similar patterns of formation, identification, division, and social stratification occur and reoccur both online and off, other communities exist online where one’s “real” identity is of negligible importance for entry into, and participation within, their boundaries.

Fan communities, for instance, may be based around anything from shared appreciation of a certain text (a novel, a TV show, video game, etc.) to a love of remixing texts (through fan fiction or video editing), or a sense of shared isolation from other, more widespread, mainstream communities (niche subgroups, fan conventions, etc.). Anonymous or pseudonymous forums, too, may be viewed as aspects of the Digital Local. Sites like 4chan, Reddit, Tumblr, and the like are not unified around the individual or geographical identities of their users. Nor are they tied to any one text or genre of texts. Rather, such communities, where identity is either elided through pseudonyms or else dispensed with
entirely, formulate around wider meta-genres associated with the community’s self-proclaimed identifications. 4chan, for example, wears its varied community interests on its front page: “4chan is a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images. There are boards dedicated to a variety of topics, from Japanese animation and culture to videogames, music, and photography. Users do not need to register an account before participating in the community. Feel free to click on a board below that interests you and jump right in!” (4chan Front Page). Tumblr, similarly, describes itself as follows: “We made it really, really simple for people to make a blog and put whatever they want on it. Stories, photos, GIFs, TV shows, links, quips, dumb jokes, smart jokes, Spotify tracks, mp3s, videos, fashion, art, deep stuff. Tumblr is 257 million different blogs, filled with literally whatever…Turns out that when you make it easy to create interesting things, that’s exactly what people do. All those great, random blogs your friends send you, those are Tumblr blogs. We’ll help you find and follow blogs like that, and we’ll help other people find and follow yours” (Tumblr, About Page). Both sites share a stated love of esoterica as their unifying principle, but even so, the samples given on both lists are suggestive of the metagenre’s characteristics. Both, for instance, use inclusive, second person language, inviting participation from new users and reassuring them that the stakes of participation are low and the process simple. Both utilize multimodal texts such as images and videos. Both express appreciation for digital technology, media, and culture.

Absent from these introductions, however, are the often rigid social standards by which long time members of these communities invite or exclude participation. Despite being anonymous, with no immediate way for users to differentiate a new participant from longtime member of the community, acceptance on 4chan is a jealously guarded resource. Forgoing the usual means of meting out social capital through pseudonyms and merit-based point systems, 4chan is, nevertheless, built around highly rigid social practices. An MIT study of 4chan’s /b/ (random) board writes:
To communicate high status in the community, most users tend to turn to textual, linguistic, and visual cues... Simply writing in 4chan dialect is non-obvious to outsiders and in-dialect writing serves as an entry-level signal of membership and status... the /b/ community uses non-technical mechanisms like slang and timestamping to signal status and identity. Consistent with common identity theory (Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler forthcoming), /b/’s anonymity is likely shaping a strong communal identity among a very large set of individuals (Bernstein et al., 56)

These non-technical mechanisms, apart from appreciation of textual meta-genres (anime, video games, politics, etc.) are, on 4chan, tied to a wider culture of transgression: “/b/’s content is frequently intentionally offensive, with little held sacred. There is racist, sexist, homophobic language, groups are often referred to using a “fag” suffix (e.g., new members are “newfags”, British users are “britfags”), and a common response to any self-shot picture by a woman is “tits or GTFO” (post a topless photo or get the f*** out). This language is part of the group identity: pushing the bounds of propriety in order to ‘hack the attention economy’ and turn heads” (4). This lies in sharp contrast with Tumblr, which is often characterized as 4chan’s “rival” (or its preferred target for bullying). Users on Tumblr, rather than aligning themselves with the wider culture of the website, section off according to chosen “fandoms”:

Overall, we see Tumblr fandom users: struggle to become part of a fandom community, question when and if they are a part of a fandom, are unclear of the size of the community they are a part of, and leave the fandom community if they disagree with the direction of a TV show. They also participate in the community in an ‘always on’ fashion despite a challenging mobile experience and frustrating search and messaging interfaces...Tumblr fandom users felt they were more ‘themselves’ on Tumblr than other social media sites and even in the ‘real world’. That is, they could talk about what mattered to them, in relation to a TV show, and they need not ‘hold back’ on saying things that may offend others or be considered boring or unimportant...We also
learned that Tumblr fandom communities created their own ‘language’ or jargon around their activities. This further demonstrates the inclusive nature of Tumblr where users have created or appropriated culturally-specific terms that only Tumblr users may understand (Hillman, 6-7).

Additionally, unlike 4chan’s gleeful nihilism, Tumblr users view their participation within communities both in terms of their chosen fandom and their chosen political causes: Second, every participant we interviewed described a key component to Tumblr fandoms as being a place for people to “strongly unite over something.” Participants talked about many cases of fandom postings related to social justice — a term used by our participants to describe the discussion of topics such as abortion, suicide, feminism and sexism. For example, larger fandoms often had entire blogs dedicated to social justice topics such as feminism” (8). A superficial examination of sites like 4chan and Tumblr, therefore, would suggest that they are closely related in terms of how community is formulated. After all, both sites privilege content over identity, both provide a “safe” space for users to communicate in ways that would be considered transgressive in the offline world or in other digital spaces, and both profess an interest in, for lack of a better term, “nerdy” genres of text such as anime, film, video games, and television.

Closer examination, however, reveals deeply contradictory protocols for identification on both sites that are unstated in the official “about” section. For instance, the ability to identify with 4chan’s seemingly hateful discourses would, by necessity alienate users from Tumblr’s commitment to social justice.

All of this serves to show that the Digital Local is an ideologically driven place, and in examining it, we may gain a greater understanding of how ideology strategically constructs and tactically navigates place, time, and power. These communities formed not from a specific locale or text, but from wider, intersecting discourses of genre and transgression. And to belong to these communities, one must not only know the proper discursive patterns, but be able to contribute to, remix, and invent one’s own texts within the community based on a deep understanding of the ideologies present. Finally, to be
proficient in one set of discourses is to be excluded from the other; one can’t easily perform the roles of both a gleefully offensive troll and a passionate warrior for social justice. This is of particular interest when one considers how identity, authority, and communities form in online spaces: Unlike in a nation or neighborhood, one can’t be born a digital local. Nor can one easily buy his or her way in with donations of money, time, or labor. Given the diffuse, decentralized nature of identity in online communities, even the largest contributions are unlikely to earn much beyond a brief sense of recognition, and perhaps a longer period of mockery. In the Digital Local, creative work within the confines of the community’s dominant discourse is a surer ticket to acceptance than the almighty dollar. That is not to say, however, that money is immaterial online. Even in anonymous spaces, the ability to amass capital provides opportunities to acquire and leverage power that, while perhaps less universal than in traditional markets, deserve deeper analysis. “Money talks”, as they say, and nowhere is this more literally true than online.

**The Authorship of Authority**

Authorship of texts, then, is, as it has always been, an ongoing negotiation between power, community, and identity. If we consider, as shown above, that space is less important to the formation of communities, and thus identities, than texts or bodies of texts, we must also reconsider how we examine the age old questions of authorship. After all, there are only so many places available, even online, therefore examining how and why some texts become “places” over others is key to understanding how the internet changes, and is changed by, the work of the author. This is, of course, less about the study of individual texts than it is about studying the social, cultural, and economic patterns that give rise to the wider bodies of literature. Foucault defines the author not as an individual human composing a text, but as a node within the larger social and cultural mechanisms of which he or she is a part. For Foucault, authorship is less a question of individual agency, and more one of the
“author function” which, he argues is “not formed spontaneously through the simple attribution of a discourse to an individual” but instead through our assigning of meaningful texts within society (“What is an Author”, 127). This perception of the author as a function of social, political, and disciplinary apparatuses has informed much contemporary scholarship, especially digital texts and online communities have further called the “ownership” of texts into question. A text is never produced in isolation: we must also consider the social, communal, and hierarchical structures surrounding it. Foucault writes that “The author’s name...is situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups of discourse and their singular mode of existence” (123), put another way, the named author serves a wider social function by giving legitimacy and authority to certain texts: “the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society” (124). Texts are produced by, and within communities, which, in turn, originate from the discourses. The author serves as a mere conduit.

I would argue, however, that this negation of the author as a mere apparatus of the wider social and ideological forces does not fully account for the ways in which texts may formulate “places” online. Foucault himself argues that space itself is less a concern of architecture or physical affordances than it is with the social impacts imposed by those spaces:

In a still more concrete manner, the problem of position is posed for men in demographic terms. The question of the arrangement of the earth’s inhabitants is not just one of knowing whether there will be enough room for all of them - a problem that is in any case of the greatest importance - but also one of knowing what are the relations of vicinity, what kind of storage, circulation, reference and classification of human elements should take preference in this or that situation, according to the objective that is being sought. In our era, space presents itself to us in the form of patterns of ordering. (“Utopias and Heterotopias”, 360).
Classification is the primary currency of many online communities. More than that, it’s the measurement by which the borders of online places are defined. And, just as crossing from one nation into another yields new problems, customs, and social norms that dictate how knowledge and power are arranged, the same holds true for online communities as well. In view of all this, I argue that an author, whether viewed as an individual actor or as a larger function of social ideologies, is not only responsible for the generation of texts; the author is also the architect of community.

Of course, architects working with brick, mortar, and zoning ordinances face challenges far different than those facing the author as architect. For one, a building has a fairly straightforward physical presence that cannot easily be denied; the function or quality of a building may be argued, but its presence cannot. Online places, however, are far more numerous and less constrained by physical limitations. Many, in fact, view online spaces as a kind of intangible sort of non-space. This is far from true, however; physicality is inescapable, even online. In *Mechanisms*, Kirschenbaum writes that any perceptions of digital and online media as somehow untethered to materiality is the product of “medial ideology”, a way of thinking about digital media in terms of the means through which it is received (the screen, the cloud, etc.) which obscures the physical, material labor of authors and audiences of a digital text. He writes that digital media is simply another modality that is situated “within a millennia-long tradition of reusable writing technologies, a tradition which also includes wax writing tables, graphite pencils, and correctible typewriter ribbons” (Location 787), and that “Forensically, electronic data is survivable by virtue of both dramatically expanding storage volumes...and the limits of the material mechanism” (Location 797). Online media only seems immaterial and unstable because it is so easy to propagate and distribute. Despite the flexibility afforded by the seeming ubiquity of digital storage, each new “version” of a digital text is still a physical artifact, located within the material world, etched onto the surface of hard-drives and archived on servers humming within cooled storage houses. Every alteration, revision, and even accessing of an online text can be recorded physically, and thus traced
The construction and distribution of online texts, then, is analogous to the formation of territory, the community imposing physical changes on the medium in which it builds itself, carving out networks of hyperlinks much like roads and byways. And, like carving out territory, this process is strategic rather than tactical; small groups of citizens may declare their property sovereign territory, but they are unlikely to be taken seriously without incredible popular support or the undeniable ability to exert force against anybody who would dispute their claims. However, not all online texts mark the formation of new communities. Subgroups and offshoots may certainly form with somewhat more ease, but ultimately it’s the mass appeal of a text, coupled with its ability to propagate itself, that allows authors to define borders along the digital landscape.

Although more fluid than geographical borders, these spaces are nonetheless measurable, inhabitable, and resistant to outside efforts to redraw them. They are, in other words, tangible places. The process by which these borders are drawn is tied to the distribution of texts, a process that Kirschenbaum calls “versioning”, by which texts spread, and change shape, throughout online communities. Kirschenbaum writes “a version itself is always critical, contingent, relative, or relational, functional, rhetorical, and perhaps above all, consequential” (Location 1946). He later argues that William Gibson’s digital poem “Agrippa” serves as an example of how online texts set in motion “unintended, emergent, distributed events that transform the work in ways that were probably unanticipated but nonetheless clearly licensed by the original project” (Location 2475). As texts spread throughout online communities by being published, shared, and remixed, the text is preserved through discussion and reproduction, and is thus cemented further as an “initiating discourse” in the community. This viral distribution and reproduction of texts is, according to Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe the means by which cultural artifacts are created. In re-examining Walter Benjamin’s concept of “aura”, or the quality inherent to culturally legitimate (as opposed to illicit or revolutionary) works of art, they write that “to be original means necessarily to be the origin of a lineage. That which has no progeny, no heirs,
is called, not original, but sterile, barren” (279). Put another way, a text is only relevant when it spawns
facsimiles and creates a framework through which new texts must be produced. Versioning grants aura,
which, in turn, gives legitimacy, which allows for greater distribution and cultural impact. The wider a
text spreads, the larger the inhabiting community and vice versa.

Online, then, the question of “what is an author?” is perhaps not quite as important as the
question, “who gets to be an author?” Everyone has a voice online, but, as in any rhetorical situation,
not every voice can be heard. By learning, therefore, about how these limited resources of time,
attention, and online “territory” are awarded to some texts over others, and who exactly does this
awarding and how, we also learn more about the mechanisms of these issues in the “real” world. When
texts can create communities, questions of “good” or “bad” become more than a matter of personal
taste. Indeed, more than just communities, the very values of the people within these places is defined
by the texts that shape the group; what persuades a community to gather in the first place, in other
words, also shapes how that group thinks and acts, and, in turn which values and ideologies are
promulgated as the community grows and evolves. This is more than just a question of who gets to
publish their work and who doesn’t; it’s a matter of which values and ideologies first shape rhetorical
situations into “places” where communities gather (whether online or off). Those values are then
“argued” through the continual process of distribution, inspiration, remixing, production, and re-
distribution of new texts, themselves inspired by prior works, which in turn either reinforce, remix, or
redefine the ideas of what is “valuable” presented by their progenitors. In The Postmodern Condition
Lyotard writes that “Legitimation is the process by which a legislator is authorized to promulgate such a
law as a norm” and that, in his example of scientific knowledge and meaning, “a ‘legislator’ dealing with
scientific discourse is authorized to prescribe the stated conditions...determining whether a statement is
to be included in that discourse for consideration by the scientific community” (8). Legitimation, Lyotard
argues, is disseminated to societies through “narratives”, the stories members of a community tell about
the community, he writes that “narratives allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to
define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is
performed or can be performed within it... The knowledge transmitted by these narrations is in no way
limited to the functions of enunciation; it determines in a single stroke what one must say in order to be
heard, what one must listen to in order to speak, and what role one must play (on the scene of diegetic
reality) to be the object of a narrative” (20-21). In other words the behavior, values, knowledge – and
what constitutes knowledge – and the practices of a community is defined by the narratives – the texts –
in which it invests authority. These texts, although belonging to the community and the power-
structures within that community, must nevertheless be authored and distributed through publication.
Although strategic institutions, such as universities, publishing companies, governments, and so on have
a great deal of power for legitimation, there are, with the advent of digital media and open access
movements, viable alternatives for the authoring, publication, and remixing of texts. It follows,
therefore, that there are also alternatives to the legitimation and community structuring that comes
with such texts. But how, with this growing body of available literature, do communities select which
authors have the authority to create these legitimating narratives and texts? Does this even apply in
digital communities, where authority is always conditional; the process of textual creation is transparent
and subject to constant remixing, parody, and revaluation? How, in short, do people decide which texts
“matter” in the Digital Local?

While the skill of an author or authors doubtlessly plays a role in determining which texts not
only get published in the first place, but distributed enough to gather a following, merely studying the
formal abilities of different authors does not go deep enough. There are, after all, plenty of brilliant
novels, paintings, and videos that are never published or else generate only a modest following. There
is, in all cultural studies, this looming question that accompanies any study of human communication;
what makes a text special? What makes one work more authentic than another? Walter Benjamin
defines this quality as “Aura” and writes that “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition...In other words, the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in the ritual, the location of its original use and value” (6). Film, which lacks that ritualistic “cult value” represents emancipation from the hierarchical, restrictive politics of the aesthetic: “the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment, the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (13). For Benjamin, aura requires presence, and because film (and by extension the web) are removed from physical presence, it creates the possibility for a new form of authorship, decentralized and thus more egalitarian than what he describes as the fascism of aesthetics (20). Physical presence and scarcity alone, however, are not the only qualities that grant aura. Online, nothing is exclusive and nothing goes away. This does not, however, mean that nothing is auratic. As Kirshchenbaum argues, the digital is material, and thus is not removed from presence. Thus, digital texts are still subject to a system of valuation and cultural weight, but not, perhaps, in the same ways envisioned by Benjamin.

The problem with Benjamin’s argument is in his definition of presence. Alexander Galloway writes that the internet is a series of “Protocols”, or “distributed management system that allows control to exist within a heterogeneous material milieu” (Protocol, Location 420) which possesses “a type of controlling logic that operates outside institutional, governmental, and corporate power, although it has important ties to all three” (Location 2017). He writes that protocols are themselves both strategic and tactical, and to attempt to “liberate” them is self-defeating:

[I]t is especially difficult to speak about protocol in a negative sense, for its very success helps preclude outsider positions. Only the participants can connect, and therefore, by definition, there can be no resistance to protocol (at least not in any direct or connected sense). Opposing protocol is like opposing gravity – there is nothing that says it can’t be done, but such a pursuit is
surely misguided and in the end hasn’t hurt gravity much… to live in the age of protocol requires political tactics drawn from within the protocological sphere (Protocol, Locations 2338-2360)

In other words, much of what happens online is about the same as in any other systems of communication. That said, however, the internet allows for these communities of action to gather along different lines of affordances. Where Benjamin locates film, and one could easily extrapolate the digital, as divorced from place, and thus from power, Galloway’s argument shows that protocols, and thus power, have a way of reinventing themselves in order to better shape and reshape their surroundings into rigidly defined places, whatever shape or medium those surroundings may take.

This does not mean, however, that they are merely new tools for reification of the same old structures of dominance. Tactical movement is still possible online, and, indeed, may be easier due to the amorphous nature of community. While not fully egalitarian, the formation of communities around texts represents a less restrictive set of affordances than brick and mortar and borders, and the publication of those texts, although informed by the traditional means of publication and reproduction, is more based on a text’s ability to reproduce itself by generating community interest. Or, in other words, a community-building text is “published” when it is able to enter into a pre-existing online place and demonstrate its value convincingly enough that it will be reproduced, remixed, and redistributed enough to generate its own distinct set of social cues and community boundaries. Where value in more traditional forms of composition and publication, such as the book, are tied to scarcity, online texts are less restricted by how many copies can be produced. As Kirschenbaum argues, “The question...is not whether we will have the storage capacity to accumulate copies of every book, film, song, conversation, email, etc. that we amass in a lifetime (yes, eventually) but how do these accumulations, these massive drifts of data, interact with irreducible levels of lived experience?” (Location 1150). Because digital texts are easily replicable and storage is spiraling exponentially towards the (functionally) infinite, the value of
digital texts is determined not by their presence or scarcity alone, but by their interactions with the “lived experiences” of their audience, and their ability to stand out among the ever-growing drifts of data accessible through the internet. In short, a text has value if a significant enough number of people deem it worth their time to notice. Digital media, therefore, is not free of the “cult value” that Benjamin argues is tied to hierarchy. In a sense, the only value of a digital text is its cult value. What The Digital Local allows us to examine, then, is how this cult value is generated, and the roles that capital – both social and monetary – play in this process.

**Conclusions**

We build who we are through the texts that we identify with. Through these texts, we define ourselves ideologically, and through identification with others drawn to those texts we define ourselves socially. The medium of these texts may take many forms, each with its own affordances; orality, literacy, nationality, locality, or digitality. All of these forms, once established, take on the common identity of “local.” Like coming home, there is something inviting and familiar about a much-loved text. This is because we see the materials we’ve used to build our selves. This would seem, on its face, to give the authors of these texts a strangely godlike power over us, their works a lingering act of persuasion that convinces us to build who we are along their terms. This is far from true, however, as, although constrained within these strategic places, we are ourselves tactical beings, free to use, remix, and discard texts as we see fit. If the currency of the text is in the attention it draws, then those texts which bore, divide, or no longer reach us suffer from the direst form of poverty. Authorship and publication are always strategic, but readership, remixing, and redistribution are always tactical. What the internet allows, therefore, is a new set of tools for both sides; the vast, post-scarcity affordances of the digital world allow authors to send their texts out to build communities on an unprecedented scale, unfettered by the limited availability of print, range of speech, or times of radio or television. It also allows for us to
reject the appeals of authorship far more easily than ever before; close the browser, unplug the computer, or find another online place to occupy. Most importantly, it allows us to trace the ways in which the strategic and tactical interact. Online, we can, through versioning, see how authors must barter the attention of their audiences, and how audiences may leverage their own resources to shape the texts to suit their own needs, and the needs of their communities. We may also trace, in turn, how this creates new communities, which build their own new texts through similar negotiations of power, attention, and resources. This is the ultimate utility of crowdsourcing. Although it does not redefine labor, capital, power, and knowledge, it does change the balance of power among these competing resources. By examining the Digital Local, the ways in which authors use communities to generate texts which create new communities, we may find a new perspective by which to understand the ever-growing architecture of human identity and the ever-changing rhetorical situations that construct it.

As with anything in the humanities, the challenge lies in the measuring. This is another great benefit of the internet’s functionally endless capacity for data storage. Online, every version – and every reproduction of every version – may be tracked with the right tools and talent. This is, of course, easier said than done, since as with any economy of persuasion, time and attention is a limited resource for scholars as well. Still, this is not for lack of trying; scholars across the humanities have tracked, analyzed, and theorized about texts, communities, and affordances, examining both the remediated versions of older works as well as the hypertextual documents unique to the internet. Similarly, economists and business experts have spilled no shortage of ink tracking and speculating about the ways that money is made and spent online, but by comparison little attention has been given to what that money represents. All too often, the humanities view the work of capital as a subset of wider issues about labor. And, in traditional, market capitalism this view makes perfect sense; the important thing in an economy of material scarcity is how capital is leveraged to create labor for production.
This relationship is less clear now, courtesy of the internet. Online, the critical usage of various forms of capital – time and attention, money, or even social capital, can – when viewed from as symbols of valuation - serve as a kind of labor; a rhetorical and persuasive tool that can work almost inversely to the way it often does offline. In the Digital Local, the tactical between-spaces that dwell within wider structures of strategic protocols, the traditional model where the owners of the means of production exchange capital in return for labor is turned on its head. In industrial capitalism, labor is most often measured against extrinsic values, where laborers barter their time and energy to those with power for resources. Online economies, however, have fuzzier dynamics of power, authority, and capital. Just as communities online are fluid and tactical, the relationships between author, audience, and collaborator are less well-defined. To understand how persuasion works online, we must turn to the ways in which money is used as a tactical, rhetorical tool. In the next chapter, we’ll turn to the subject of crowdfunding, and examine the ways in which less-powerful authors use the service of Kickstarter to raise money for the texts that, they hope, will both serve and create communities. By studying how these authors leverage their talent, labor, and reputation in exchange for capital, and how their would-be audience leverages capital to shape the outcomes of that labor, we may begin to better understand how, online, social capital is bartered by authors in exchange for monetary capital from their audience. As I’ve said, “money talks” and online, as the next chapter will show, it speaks many different languages.
In 2014, the AIDS advocacy magazine PLUS published an article entitled “Is Potato Salad Really More Important than AIDS Activism?”. The article was written by activist and photographer Bill Bytsura detailing his attempts at crowdfunding a book of photography of AIDS activist taken between the years 1989 and 1998. His project was intended to raise awareness about what he describes as a returning apathy about HIV/AIDS. The project, however, failed to raise the needed funds, and in response, Bytsura wrote the following:

*I guess I had no idea how deep that apathy was. Half way through my Kickstarter campaign, pledges currently amount to one-sixth of the needed funding… I have spent the last two weeks reaching out to hundreds of friends and strangers alike, asking for donations. And I watched the pledges trickle in. And then stop. This week, I happened to notice that another Kickstarter campaign focused on making potato salad drew 6,911 backers in August for a total of $55,492 in pledges. The guy who created the campaign was only looking for a total donation of $10... Maybe I don’t really understand social media. Maybe I don’t really understand today’s priorities. But, could somebody explain to me how a project about potato salad can out-fund a book project about AIDS activism?*

It’s easy to appreciate Bytsura’s frustration and confusion. For many talented activists, authors, and aspiring community organizers crowdfunding offers a promising new means to pursue their work outside of the constraints of traditional models of publication and fund-raising. However, when, despite impassioned calls for action and a clear demonstration of a project’s importance, funding fails to materialize, this promise suddenly feels hollow, confusing, and even arbitrary. A ten dollar potato salad receiving tens of thousands of dollars while a book for an important cause like Bytsura’s does not even
make its minimum seems not just confusing, but absurd, and seems, at first glance, to call crowdfunding’s entire mission into question. Why should creators, authors, and activists trust in the crowd if it’s so shallow and apathetic? The problem, however, is not with the crowd, but with the technical and rhetorical affordances of crowdfunding itself. It’s not that people care more about potato salad than AIDS activism. It’s that the protocols for persuasion within the community that rose around that particular potato salad Kickstarter (which I will be exploring further in chapter 4) were more conducive to the symbolic-analytic labor of crowdfunding than the more narrowly defined protocols of online activism, AIDS awareness, and photography (in particular photography about BOTH activism and AIDS awareness). It’s all a matter of which protocols of behavior best fit the community’s efforts, which are, themselves, determined by the generic and discursive assumptions shared by members of communities. I argue that the worthiness, content, and even the quality of a proposed crowdfunding project is less relevant to its success than the project’s ability to organize, and speak to the needs and desires of, wide and self-sustaining discourse communities. Crowdfunding services like Kickstarter are not communities themselves; rather, they are a genre of discursive texts that unify the smaller, locally situated communities around a handful of conventions. By examining these conventions, and, through in-depth rhetorical analysis, observing the ways in which authors both create and are limited by the rhetorical situations of their communities, we can understand not only how audiences and authors exchange social capital with monetary capital, but why.

How these communities speak to authors – and how authors can speak to these communities – is a matter of genre awareness. In order to examine and define the protocols of the Kickstarter “community”, and to understand this complex interplay between author, community, and funding, I will, in this chapter, draw upon the methodology of rhetorical genre analysis in order to isolate common traits shared by texts from within the genre and, from there, examine the assumptions and ideologies embodied by those different genre moves and tropes. My study will examine different “types” of
crowdfunding pitches using what Jonathan Frow calls “prototypical” examples of the genre. Frow explains that this approach to studying and defining genre begins with examining the characteristics of a single prototypical example and then examining how the common characteristics grow “fuzzy” as other samples’ characteristics move away from the terms set by the central core. This method of classification and examination is “as much pragmatic as it is conceptual, a matter of how we wish to contextualize these texts and the uses we wish to make of them...in dealing with questions of genre, our concern should not be with matters of taxonomic substance...but rather with questions of use” (Genre, 54-55). Like Frow, therefore, I am less concerned with outlining the absolute borders of what crowdfunding does – or does not – do, as these borders are fuzzy and ever shifting. Instead, I will be examining these texts in terms of their uses; namely, how they use the characteristics of the genre to build community, authority, and funding towards the creation of a project or text.

However, merely examining “Crowdfunding” as a single, monolithic genre is not sufficient to understand the different nuances and rhetorical assumptions held by different communities surrounding different projects. As Frow argues, “we need to understand both the continuities and discontinuities in what is designated by a generic label...as well as the variant constitution of the systems within which genres function” (137). In other words, even unified as they are by central characteristics, the traits – the needs, affordances, and textual norms – of a genre grow and change as the communities making use of them – and the cultures that inform such communities – shape the contexts in which they occur. A campaign for the funding of a video game, for instance, relies on a very different set of values and needs than a campaign to fund a local community restoration project, or to fund surgery for a wounded cat. Although both campaigns are unified under what is called the “meta-genre” of crowdfunding, and may be measured by several similar core traits, there will be key differences in each “sub-genre” which cannot be elided. By examining different subgenres unified under the meta-genre of crowdfunding, and in tracing the central and disparate moves and principles, we can, in turn, see how
the communities for which the texts are intended trace their own systems of valuation, authorization, and meaning. Janet Giltrow writes that “meta-genres are atmospheres of wordings and activities, demonstrated precedents or sequestered expectations – atmospheres surrounding genres. Like genres themselves, meta-genres are indexed to their context of use: every activity – or discipline – having its own relation to and life in language, and meta-genres representing or advancing these relations, positioning genres in relation to other activities” and that “At the same time as the concept of meta-genre can help us attend to the kind and quantity of information a context transmits to writers and readers, we could also come to recognize that meta-genres – like genres themselves – are situated expressions, motivated by their contexts of use” which may in turn contribute to “a more systemic means of understanding situations” in which rhetorics occur (“Meta-Genre”, 195-197).

Therefore my study will compartmentalize the genres of crowdfunding into four different categories, classified as follows: Technical Artifacts, Interactive Media, Publications, and Civic Projects. I will define each category along the lines of their prototypical texts, the categories themselves being divided by the discourse communities to which they belong, each one defined by its stated goal, modalities of publication or action, technical affordances, and scale of production. This is, again, a classification system designed to focus on the uses of these texts and what those uses tell us about the audiences for which they are intended. Berkenkotter and Huckin argue that “genres are inherently dynamic rhetorical structures that can be manipulated according to the conditions of use and that genre knowledge is therefore best conceptualized as a form of situated cognition embedded in disciplinary activities” (“Rethinking Genre from a Sociocognitive Perspective”, 477), and, as Daniel Chandler succinctly states, “how we define a genre depends on our purpose” (An Introduction to Genre Theory, 3). My categories and definitions, therefore, are by no means meant to be a comprehensive list. Nor are they meant to set hard parameters for what may or may not be defined as a text within the wider genre of “Crowdfunding Pitches.” Instead, I organize these categories according to the overall purpose of this
paper; namely, to show how communities formulate around texts and authors. I use the word “texts” for each category because, even in the case of technical artifacts like 3D printers, smart watches, and other popular gadgets made via Kickstarter, there must always be an accompanying text where the creators propose, describe, and argue for their vision. The artifact itself may be the primary draw for individual members of the audience, but the proposal pitch is the text that relies upon knowledge of the norms of the community. It is the pitch, the act of persuasion compressed into one to ten minutes of video footage, which truly shapes these communities.

As a genre analysis of crowdfunding has not previously been attempted (there have been linguistic analyses, but these have focused on the language typically used by lucrative projects as a kind of best practices study) I will be drawing upon the work of linguists Ulla Connor and Anna Muranen in order to build an analytical frame for my own work. Their study “Linguistic Analysis of Grant Proposals: European Union Research Grants” built a genre analysis of academic grant proposals based on Bhatia’s earlier study of sales letters and job applications. In it, Connor and Mauranen argue that “grant proposals need to capture the attention of the reader; they need to describe the idea; they need to adjust to the needs of the readers; and they need to establish the writer’s competence” (48). Their study broke grant proposals down into ten common moves. Their analysis showed how each of these moves served both to persuade an audience of the project’s (and author’s) credibility and importance, and to show how the project will fill an important void in the audience’s discourse community. Of these ten moves, they further argued that four were specific to the genre. They classified these in terms of “claims” made regarding the project: Achievement, Benefit, Importance, and Compliance. The first two are parallel moves, distinguished essentially only by their reference to either the research world, or to the ‘real’ world outside. Both anticipate beneficial outcomes from the proposed project. The “Importance” move stresses the worth of the project from other angles than its downright outcomes, but is otherwise quite similar in spirit to the two moves, projecting a positive image of the intended
research. The remaining special move, “Compliance”, is different in that it seeks to show that the research is directly relevant to the sponsors’ expressed wishes (60). Grant requests, like crowdfunding pitches, needed to go further than simply persuading the audience to accept the importance of a project. They require moves that both predict the needs of the audience’s disciplinary community and demonstrate how an as-yet-unrealized project will fill those needs. A successful grant proposal, therefore, requires narrow, specific focus on a given discourse community, since, unlike job applications and advertisements, the benefits of the project are not self-evident. Although not the focus of my analysis, this system of further classification of moves within a subgenre will provide a useful form of shorthand for the discussion of the “components” of each prototypical text I will be analyzing.

Moreover, it will enable me to contrast crowdfunding moves from the older, more established genre of grant requests by highlight important differences in the overall intentions of certain common moves that I have noticed throughout the transcribing and study of my corpus, a body of fifty pitch videos taken from Kickstarter.com. For instance, most of the videos I’ve analyzed begin with a move similar to the “Importance Claim” outlined by Connor and Muranen. However, given that many pitches were for toys, games, or other comparatively frivolous technologies, the definition outlined in their paper does not quite fit many proposals from my corpus. I’ve instead redefined this move as a “Passion Claim”, the definition of which will be discussed later. However, when studying crowdfunding pitches that do highlight the importance of a project, such as works of activism or civic projects, the “Importance Claim” makes its return. By studying how this occurs, and analyzing the rhetorical, textual, and community-driven assumptions made by making a claim of importance versus a claim of passion for a project, we see how the community, and its discursive texts, shape the values used to persuade backers to donate.
Technical Artifacts

Charles Bazerman writes that “technology has always been fundamentally designed to meet human ends. Thus, technology, as a human-made object, has always been part of human needs, desires, values, and evaluation, articulated in language and at the very heart of rhetoric” and that “technology itself moves rapidly outward from the small worlds of the expert innovators into the lives of many different kinds of people” (Technology and Human Meaning, 383-384). He later concludes “The rhetoric of technology shows how the objects of the built environment become part of our systems of goals, values, and meaning, part of our articulated interests, struggles, and activities. The technological object, its circulation in many social worlds, and the impact it has on our daily lives give rise to the further discourses of new corporations” (386). As such, when viewing technical artifacts and the efforts to crowdfunding their development, I believe that it is important to focus less on the modalities of the machine itself, and more on the object’s rhetorical significance as it first becomes a means to meet the ends of a niche community and then expands out to a wider, more populous community of social worlds. For the purposes of this study, then, I define the category of “Technical Artifacts” as a subgenre of crowdfunding pitches working towards the development of a technology – a material, distributable, product – designed to meet some form of human end within a growing system of goals. These technologies may be digital, but that is not required. Nor is innovation; many of the pitches in my wider corpus seek only to expand the function of already-existing devices through the development of a new “version” of the product. In short, these pitches seek funding for the development and distribution of a material thing.

Prototypical Text: Oculus Rift

Perhaps the most famous (and controversial) Kickstarter project of all, the Oculus Rift launched its campaign on August 1st, 2012. It’s described by creator Palmer Luckey in the following terms:
What we’re doing at Oculus is trying to create the world’s best virtual reality headset, designed specifically for gaming. Where this started was my parent’s garage in Longbeach California. And I was interested in stereoscopic displays, I was interested in head mounts, and the problem was nothing gave me the experience I wanted; the Matrix, where I can plug in and actually be in the game. I was sure there was something out there that I could buy, and the reality is that there’s nothing. I set up to change that with the Oculus Rift (Oculus Rift, Kickstarter).

The campaign asked for $250,000, and, upon conclusion on September 1st, 2012, had drawn 9,522 backers, who pledged a total of $2,437,429. The majority of these backers, roughly five thousand, pledged between $300 and $335. Although a massive success, the project only earned mainstream attention when its rights were purchased by Facebook for close to $2 billion. In the press release announcing the acquisition on March 24, 2014, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerburg explained his intentions for the Oculus Rift:

> Our mission is to make the world more open and connected. For the past few years, this has mostly meant building mobile apps that help you share with the people you care about. We have a lot more to do on mobile, but at this point we feel we’re in a position where we can start focusing on what platforms will come next to enable even more useful, entertaining and personal experiences. This is where Oculus comes in. They build virtual reality technology, like the Oculus Rift headset. When you put it on, you enter a completely immersive computer-generated environment, like a game or a movie scene or a place far away... This is really a new communication platform. By feeling truly present, you can share unbounded spaces and experiences with the people in your life. Imagine sharing not just moments with your friends online, but entire experiences and adventures.
Zuckerberg’s corporate-jargon-laced press release illustrates a fundamental shift in the size, scale, and values of the community surrounding the project. “Immersive gaming will be the first, and Oculus already has big plans here that won’t be changing and we hope to accelerate” Zuckerberg wrote. “The Rift is highly anticipated by the gaming community, and there’s a lot of interest from developers in building for this platform.” After acknowledging and mollifying the community whose interest, efforts, and funds had helped to create the Oculus, however, Zuckerberg continued, “But this is just the start. After games, we’re going to make Oculus a platform for many other experiences. Imagine enjoying a court side seat at a game, studying in a classroom of students and teachers all over the world or consulting with a doctor face-to-face – just by putting on goggles in your home.” The shift in values from those of a niche, specialized community of gaming enthusiasts to those of a wider, more mainstream audience of general social media users is apparent in the examples given by Zuckerberg. In effect, the emphasis on pragmatic uses such as education and medical care are an argument that Oculus – and in a larger sense, virtual reality – is not just a toy, but a technology of many social worlds.

This purchase was met with controversy from the “gaming community” of enthusiasts who sponsored the Oculus’s initial pitch. In an effort to trace the backlash that followed the purchase, Steven Poole of the Guardian wrote that there was “an obvious question of economic justice here. The original Kickstarter backers of Oculus Rift might not have been explicitly granted shares in the company, but the company wouldn’t exist without their initial contribution. About 10,000 people gave Oculus $2.5m between them. I for one am struggling to think of a good reason why each of them shouldn’t get a proportional share of that $2bn sale.” Indeed, there was a great deal of consideration, both from backers of the project and from economists, about what rights to the Oculus’s profit those who pledged to fund it had, if any. However, I believe that this was only a minor part of the blowback against Facebook and Oculus. Rather than the expectation of extrinsic (financial) reward, the feelings of betrayal from the backers stemmed from the sense of being fleeced – of being promised an artifact for the
community by an insider of that same community, only to have their values and goals for the technology downgraded in importance in favor of those belonging to the larger, mainstream markets. Markus Pearson, creator of the popular game Minecraft, wrote in a blog post (that has since been removed but was cited frequently in various gaming press magazines) that “I did not chip in ten grand to seed a first investment round to build value for a Facebook acquisition” (Quoted in Kotaku, 2014), and that “Facebook is not a game tech company...Facebook has a history of caring about building user numbers, and nothing but building user numbers. People have made games for Facebook platforms before, and while it worked great for a while, they were stuck in a very unfortunate position when Facebook eventually changed the platform to better fit the social experience they were trying to build...I definitely want to be a part of VR, but I will not work with Facebook. Their motives are too unclear and shifting, and they haven’t historically been a stable platform. There’s nothing about their history that makes me trust them, and that makes them seem creepy to me.” (Quoted in MIT Technology Review, 2014).

Although he later wrote a retraction to this post and has since pledged to work closely with Oculus creator Palmer Luckey and John Carmack of ID Software, Pearson’s frustration reflects the true importance of crowdfunding; the product designed is, for the community, of secondary importance to the community itself. The most telling part, I believe, is Pearson’s assertion that Facebook’s motives – its community’s values – are not in line with the values that drove him – and thousands of others – to invest in the development of a formerly niche device.

It is in examining this controversy and the response to it that we see what is truly valued within online communities, and what drives them to invest in crowdfunding projects. Luckey’s initial pitch reflects more than just enthusiasm for virtual reality and video gaming; it uses the inclusive language of a peer, and, along with the jargon, interviews, and other rhetorical moves significant only to a smaller audience of “gamers”, attempts to demonstrate a sense of identification with the audience – or, more accurately, with a specific subgroup within the audience. We see in this persuasive act Palmer Luckey’s
ability to create identification with his audience using the technical object – the Oculus in this instance –
to identify a shared foundation of needs and desires. It was not the technology itself, but the needs the
technology promised to fulfill that drew interest from the community of “gaming enthusiasts”, and it
was the sharp, sudden division of the Oculus’s sale to Facebook that caused such intense feelings of
betrayal.

Analysis

Although there are numerous technical artifacts funded through Kickstarter, many of which
raise similar or higher levels of funding and interest as the Oculus, I have chosen the Oculus’s pitch as a
prototypical text for a number of reasons. First is for the timing: 2012 was a fruitful year for technical
artifacts, seeing projects like the Ouya, the Pebble Watch, and several more reaching funds well in
excess of their initial goals. The Oculus, however, stands out in a number of other ways as well, including
the level of funding, the number of backers, and the mainstream attention it went on to earn. Even so,
however, the primary reason for selecting the Oculus as the prototypical text of the subgenre relates to
the rhetorical moves and tropes utilized by a project which, in effect, had to make a far stronger case for
itself than other, similar artifacts. The Oculus, through Luckey’s use of identification and division, was
able to build credibility for itself in spite of the product it was advertising, where other projects, such as
the Ouya or Pebble Watch, could rely on the project itself – or their teams made up of industry veterans
with impressive records of prior work, to build a persuasive ethos.

By contrast, Palmer Luckey, prior to the success of his Kickstarter project, was unknown, with no
body of work to point to. More importantly, the project itself, a virtual reality headset, could not rely on
any kind of recognition to draw interest – if anything, the reputation of virtual reality was an obstacle,
inviting cynicism, skepticism, and doubt from audiences. The Oculus’s pitch, therefore, is the
prototypical text of the subgenre as much for the level of funding and interest it received as it is for its
ability to demonstrate the persuasive force of identification through crowdfunding as a medium. Luckey could rely only on his ability to create a sense of shared values with his audience in order to receive funding, and he was able to do so through the tactical use of language and dialects within the community, the support of well-known but still niche experts who could point to a prior body of beloved but specialized work, and, most importantly, an ability to performatively express the same frustrations and divisions that others within the community were likely to feel regarding virtual reality, and the wider state of their community as a whole. This performance of expertise has always been critical to the Rhetorical Velocity of new technologies, as the needs, demands, and values of potential sponsors, many of whom operate outside of the norms of the scientific discourse communities in which invention occurs, demands the re-appropriation of specialized discourses for the lexical, technical, and cultural knowledge of an entirely different community, which, itself, demands a great deal of critical awareness for how the technology – and the persuasive act of its valuation – will be received by both insiders and outsiders of the community. Charles Bazerman, in discussing the invention and dissemination of Thomas Edison’s light, writes:

*In the Edison laboratories and companies, the charismatic faith that Edison elicited was the key value that elicited the work, the commitment, and the relationships that kept the project moving forward with energy and attention... The ongoing tensions between what one could claim... and what one could produce as material spectacle... framed the entire period of development of the incandescent light... Because each communicative project intersects with different sets of communicative systems at different moments of the project's unfolding, each finding a different point and angle of intersection to pursue its own interests and trajectory, rhetoric cannot be a closed and fixed techne offering standard advice about a limited set of practices. Rather, the tools for analyzing and offering advice about communicative actions must be sensitive to the full range of forces, forms, and systems that influence each particular instance, and to the position*
and interests of each participant...As a technology on its way to successful integration finds its satisfactory representation within each system, it takes on system-appropriate meanings and loses other meanings which are not germane to the discourse. In this way, the technology becomes something different in each representational realm (The Language of Edison’s Light, 337-339).

In other words, the development of a new technology is first rhetorical, then technical, with the “spectacle” of the machine itself serving as another kind of persuasive act, one easily substituted for others like celebrity, promises, and shared values. It was not the project itself that kept the work going, but Edison’s charisma and rhetorical savvy. Similarly, absent a material spectacle, Luckey’s pitch relied heavily on knowledge of the interests of participants and celebrity endorsement (but celebrities whose words would be valued within the smaller representational realm of Luckey’s audience). This differs from Edison’s performance, as it is made, in the Kickstarter pitch, for those within the same discourse community for which the Rift is being designed. However, it is important to note that, as Ridolfo and DeVoss argue, the widening scope of digital technologies have enabled a much broader range of people to count themselves as members of a discourse community, including diverse levels of technical expertise and specialized knowledge. In order to effectively reach out even to his own community of technical enthusiasts, Luckey must strike a balance between the performance of expert and peer; leader and collaborator. To this end, Luckey’s video begins with an attempt to create identification with his audience through a shared passion for games:

    My name Palmer Luckey and I’m a virtual reality enthusiast and the designer of the rift. Games are something I’m really passionate about. And more than playing games, I’m passionate about bringing games to the next level. What we’re doing at Oculus is trying to create the world’s best virtual reality headset, designed specifically for gaming. Where this started was my parent’s
garage in Longbeach California. And I was interested in stereoscopic displays, I was interested in head mounts, and the problem was nothing gave me the experience I wanted; the Matrix, where I can plug in and actually be in the game. I was sure there was something out there that I could buy, and the reality is that there’s nothing. I set out to change that with the Oculus Rift. The magic that sets the rift apart is immersive stereoscopic 3D rendering, a massive field of view, and ultra-low-latency head tracking.

In overtly proclaiming his love of technology and gaming, Luckey is performing a move which, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, I call a “Passion Claim”, modeled after Conner and Muranen’s study of genre moves within grant writing. They write that, in grant requests, an “Importance Claim” is a “move which makes out the proposal, its objectives, anticipated outcomes, or the territory as particularly important or topical, much needed or urgent with respect to either the ‘real world’ or to the research field” (58). This move sets the stage for the overall narrative of the video by introducing viewers to the lead developer of a project and setting the overall tone of the pitch as humorous, professional, or sincere. The lead developer speaks directly to the camera and, after greeting the viewer, will attempt to establish him or herself as a passionate contributor to the field. “Importance” here is defined along different lines than it would be in grants; there is no disciplinary field to address, and as such, no agreed-upon credentialing process to name someone as a member of the “gaming” community or not. The importance of this, and other crowdfunding projects, then, hinges less on the disciplinary structures of the academy or business world than on the ability of a participant to speak the same language as his or her peers, and, in this move, to do so with enthusiasm and passion. It is also, more importantly, designed to elicit identification with the audience. Beyond the obvious claim of shared interests with his viewers (“Games are something I’m really passionate about”), are other signifiers of identification using a number of potential shared cultural experiences. His description of his time in his parent’s garage adds little to viewer’s knowledge of the project, but it locates his work outside of advanced laboratories or
corporate R&D departments, siting his enthusiasm as something personal and, in keeping with the Maker Movement’s ideology, tactical. Next, his expression of disappointment with a “Gap” in the field, namely the lack of the Matrix-like experience he wants, is similar to Conner and Muranen’s methodology, where the “Gap Claim” of a grant request is “a move which indicates that there is a gap in knowledge or a problem in the territory...the implication is that the gap needs to be filled or the problem solved, and later moves...then indicate how the study intends to fulfill these needs” (54). Of special importance to this is Luckey’s statement that “I was sure there was something out there that I could buy, and the reality is that there’s nothing.” The use of the word “buy” here represents both another shared experience among his audience (who hasn’t tried to purchase a device only to be disappointed?), and, more interestingly, a tacit call to action for his viewers; like you, he tried to purchase a solution to his problem. Unlike him, however, the viewer was being given the opportunity to do just that by backing his project. Finally, his matter-of-fact assertion of “I set out to change that with the Oculus Rift” reflects the hacker/maker ethos of individualistic, intrinsically motivated innovation. Luckey’s solution to the problem is matter-of-fact, intrinsically motivated, and bold in its directness. He is not relying on corporations, publishers, or other, better-funded innovators to give him what he wants – his failed efforts to buy a working VR headset indicate that he tried but gave up on that – and so, absent permission or traditional sponsorship, he proposes to solve the problem himself, a claim which aligns him with the style of commons-based, creative production valued and respected on Kickstarter. In effect, this introductory passion claim tells the viewer, “I’m one of you. Aren’t you tired of this problem? Let’s work on solving it, then.” At once establishing himself as a part of the community, and inviting the community to participate in realizing his authorial vision of proper virtual reality.

Luckey then seeks to establish his credibility. The narrative of the rebel inventor served to create a sense of identification with viewers, but now the video must shift to focus on credentialing, what Conner and Muranen call a “Competence Claim.” Absent a product to demonstrate or a strong personal
body of work to cite, Luckey adopts an approach like Edison’s by drawing on celebrity and authority in order to build trust from his viewers. Following his introduction, Luckey introduces John Carmack, developer of the famous “Doom” and “Quake” game series and owner of ID Software. Carmack, who would later go on to become Luckey’s partner following the buyout by Facebook, endorsed the Oculus in terms that more directly linked the project to the values of the intended audience:

For a certain segment of the population, the Hacker / Maker crowd, this is going to be awesomely cool to work with...What I’ve got now is, I honestly think, the best VR demo probably the world has ever seen...We’re certainly going to take this into our future projects.

Following Carmack’s endorsement were several other such promises to make use of the device from other famous figures in the “gaming” community, all of them the owners, directors, and lead developers of known game companies. These celebrity endorsements were almost certainly carefully selected by Carmack and Luckey, not only to show developer interest in the project, but also to provide ample evidence of identification with the audience, who would both recognize and appreciate the niche celebrity wielded by these developers. Bazerman writes that “The success of representations that are necessary for the social embedding of a new technology involves the process of enlistment...the enlistment of allies is a part of the process of making a finding or a technology strong by bringing more resources to its team” (339) and later that “stable patent fixes the property, but it also fixes a description of the innovation and the identity of the innovator. That is, a successful speech act, accepted as a social fact by others who respect the integrity of the speech act, fixes a social understanding of events and of the representations that are promulgated as part of the speech event” (343). In this case, however, it is the enlistment of allies, not the stability of the patent, which allows the audience to accept Luckey’s claims as social fact. The endorsements build credibility both in the device’s integrity, and, more importantly, in Luckey’s authority to argue for its integrity. The language used by these
celebrities, too, reinforces the ideologies of innovation, independence, and optimism. Brendan Iribe, the Co-Founder of Scaleform Games, says that the Oculus is “an incredible opportunity for game developers to experience something new.” Cliff Bleszinski of Epic Games called the prototype he saw “extremely promising” and said that he and his team were “extremely excited” to work with it. Michael Abrash and Gabe Newell of Valve Software also used the word “exciting” in describing the Oculus, and Abrash even went on to speculate that “It could be the beginning of a whole new industry that leads us eventually to having true augmentation all the time, every place.” This repetition of positive, upbeat, future-focused language by well-respected industry figures sets a feverishly hopeful tone to the video’s speech act, and invites other viewers to imagine themselves as contemporaries of these figures of innovation and excitement.

The tone then shifts somewhat as Luckey delves into the technical side of Oculus, explaining, in brief, its development:

*There’s a lot of great head-mounted displays out there, but they’re all really, really expensive. Up to over $100,000. What the Rift does, is it makes a high-end virtual reality experience available to the average gamer. So most consumer head-mounted displays have a diagonal field of view of about thirty or forty degrees. You see a really small image, way off in the distance and it doesn’t make you feel like you’re there. With the Oculus Rift, you get a diagonal field of view of one hundred and ten degrees. That means you’re not looking at a screen anymore, you actually feel like you’re inside of the world... One of the biggest problems with Virtual Reality up to this point is latency. The benefit of the Rift is that it’s designed to be really, really low latency. So rather than looking like this, where you turn your head and it follows, it actually follows with your view, no matter what you do.*
Luckey’s description is couched in technical terminology and jargon. He does not explain the meaning of these terms himself, instead intercutting his explanation with short clips from his interviewees to give a kind of layperson’s breakdown. Where before, through celebrity endorsement, the tone was one of open invitation and collaboration, now, through Luckey’s technical, specialized terminology it has shifted to something more exclusive and elite. The near lack of clarification carries an implication of knowledge on the audience’s part – a tacit “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you what this means – which allows those who are at least passingly familiar with such jargon to feel “in the know.” It does not, however, actively exclude those who are unfamiliar with the technical language of software and hardware. Rather, it serves as a kind of further ethos-builder for those who are not in the know as well. The amateur computer enthusiast watching the video may not know how the degrees of field of vision are measured, but he or she is likely to trust that Luckey knows.

The role of expertise as a persuasive force in crowdfunding has been well documented: A 2014 study by Kim et al., for instance, concluded that “the influence of these experts further depends on their past performance, which is consistent with the conjecture that their influence most likely stems from their credibility based on past experience on the platform...the crowd, although inexperienced, are rather sophisticated in their ability to identify and exploit nuanced differences between different signals within the same market” (“The Experts in the Crowd”, 3). In short, the celebrity game developers served as the “expert investors”, whose credibility underwent a sort of transfer to Luckey and his project. Luckey’s subsequent use of technical language and jargon familiar (at least in passing) to his community cements his image as both an expert himself, and one who has done extensive and reliable work already, and thus can support his request for money with something substantial despite his relative inexperience. This is especially relevant for the development of technical artifacts, since, as Ornatowski argues, “technical facts and artifacts, like scientific facts and artifacts, are-at least to a significant extent-constructed through discursive transactions (including technical documents) that accompany the
process of technology development” (2+2 = 5 if 2 is Large Enough, 333). Finally, after a bit more discussion of the Oculus’s technical components, Luckey wraps up his pitch with what Connor and Muranen call a “Compliance Claim”, which “makes explicit the relevance of the proposal to [audience] objectives, usually with highly specific reference to directives and/or the set of goals of the program in question” (59). In the case of crowdfunding pitches, the compliance claim also serves to explain why the project has turned to Kickstarter for funding, in effect reaching out directly to the audience and asking for help. Luckey explains:

The reason we’re using Kickstarter is so we can get these Dev Kits into the hands of developers as fast as possible. That way they can try it for themselves and start integrating support into their games and engines. We really need developer feedback so that we can make the consumer version of this even more incredible than it already is.

He then follows this with outside support from his interviewed celebrities, both of whom argue for game developers, especially small-scale ones, to get an early start and “not wait until we have a consumer version.” Luckey then concludes by saying, “If you want to be one of the first to try the Rift, grab a Dev Kit. We’ll provide access to our SDK, Unreal and Unity Engine integration, and a copy of Doom 3 BFG edition, the first Oculus-ready game. So join the revolution, make a pledge, and help us change gaming forever.” Unlike other subgenres of crowdfunding – as I will show in later sections of the chapter – this does not argue for the project’s vulnerability when asking the audience for help. Instead, the use of clearly illustrated directives and goals, the highly optimistic language – for instance, the statement that they will use audience feedback to make the product “more incredible than it already is” and the urging of participants to join in before the supposedly inevitable consumer version – assures audiences of the project’s inevitable development. What is at stake here is the shape that the project will take, with the viewer, who may consider themselves the small-scale developers called to action, serving as a valued
guide, a collaborative voice that will shape the rhetorical spaces surrounding the technology even as it reshapes and “revolutionizes” the community. Ornatsowski writes that “Technology marketing...involves complex rhetorical processes through which needs are created and negotiated, technologies are developed and shaped, and frameworks of mutual interests are established in relation to evolving technical artifacts...Developing a technical need is mainly a matter of creating pressures and opportunities that guide choice in the desired direction” (323). In the case of crowdfunding pitches for these technical artifacts, those pressures and opportunities go both ways. Luckey argues that he needs the support of his audience in order to guide the future he is claiming to create, to work with him in determining how (not if) the best way to change gaming would be. On the other hand, the audience is also have pressure exerted on it by the pitch; much like a ground-floor investment, the pitch is made to represent a limited-time opportunity, not to earn money from investing in the Oculus Rift, but to have their voice heard as the nascent technology begins to “change gaming forever.”

Conclusions

In their study “The Language that Gets People to Give”, Mitra and Gilbert argue that several linguistic moves can be measurably associated with success or failure in crowdfunding. Among other categories, they include language that helps to establish “Reciprocity”, “Scarcity”, “Social Proof”, “Social Identity”, and “Authority” as being highly influential on the fate of a crowdfunding pitch (9-13). Indeed, Luckey’s pitch uses linguistic and rhetorical techniques that establish each of these. His video begins by establishing his Social Proof and Identity as a part of the “gaming” community. He then shifts focus to establishing his authority. Then, of particular interest to this project, is the ending, where, in his Compliance Claim, he ties the twin values of Reciprocity to Scarcity, creating a sense of both generosity and pressure, the latter of which is given special weight by his earlier establishment of his own authority. Mitra and Gilbert write that in crowdfunding reciprocity is often established through the use
of language moves that “offer a reward or gift in return for donation funds” (9). They then argue that, in the case of scarcity, the language “emphasizes limited time availability...exclusivity is often harnessed when making offers, leading to higher chances of acceptance” (10). In the case of Oculus Rift, the promise of reciprocity doubles as the “exclusive offer.” In other words, the video ends by, in effect, offering viewers a say in how their own community is shaped by Luckey’s invention, but only if they help him out now, before it becomes a stable technology within the community. This is what Bazerman calls “Black Boxing” of a technology, whereby “uncertainties surrounding it are put to rest and thereby forgotten, and the concept or technology is taken as a whole and unquestioned accomplishment” (344). The video is not arguing for the technology’s right to exist. Rather, it is an open call to the audience to collaborate with Luckey on shaping the technology – and through the technology the gaming community itself – before it becomes black boxed.

In the subgenre of technical artifacts, the authors’ goal is to ensure that it is their artifact that is seen as the one that best encompasses the technical and social needs within the existing social framework. To do this, they must not only prove that they are insiders within the community; they must also prove that – whatever stage of development it may be in – that their project is technically possible, that its uses will be ubiquitously influential, and that while the final, black boxed machine will be widely accessible, the opportunity to shape its development is both open within, and exclusive to, the smaller niche community. This is what crowdfunding promises to audiences; a chance to give voice to their ideals about the future of their community. This is also, in the case of the Oculus, the root of people’s ever-evolving bitterness about the project. From Pearson’s now-retracted condemnation of Facebook’s ideology and Luckey’s tacit support of it, to the ongoing controversy surrounding the steep price of the soon-to-be-finished final product, the anger always stems from the same place. It’s not a feeling of being bilked out of money that drives the Oculus Rift’s detractors, but a feeling of betrayed trust – of being promised a voice in the future of their community, only to have that voice smothered by the weight of
Facebook’s billions. And, as I will show in Chapter 4, should Luckey ever need to turn to Kickstarter again, he may find his audience less than eager to show him their money a second time.

**Interactive Media**

This category is about video games. Or, more accurately, it’s *mostly* about video games. It merits its own category, distinct from technical artifacts and publications, for a number of reasons. One of which is the sheer scale, which eclipses most other types of crowdfunding in terms of participation, funding, and interest. The top two most funded games on Kickstarter, *Shenmue 3* and *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*, raised over six million dollars and over five and a half million respectively, both of which counted over sixty thousand backers participating. On the whole, of the billion dollars’ worth of investments made through Kickstarter as of March, 2014, $215 million came from video game projects (Polygon). It has also received a great deal of scholarly and popular attention following the success of the 2012 Kickstarter Campaign for *Broken Age*, then called “Double-Fine Adventure”. This attention has led to several comprehensive studies about the best practices for funding a game online, as well as the motivations of investors. A study conducted by the University of Cologne focuses on video game Kickstarters, examining the motivations behind backers choosing whether or not to invest:

> Following the demand motive, charity motives in the broadest meaning of this word also play a role. Developers are...perceived as being strangled by the conventions of the mainstream market and in need of support. A particularly highly involved group shows an impetus of changing the rules of the game, mainly aiming at the market power and gatekeeping role of large publishers. Surprisingly, the “crowd” seems to be completely unimpressed by the fact that the developers reap the full economic benefits of a successfully developed game. This is surprising as studies in other fields consistently showed that the willingness to give on a charity logic is almost non-existent once the beneficiary works on a for-profit basis (Steigenberger, 8)
This is similar to the attitudes prevalent in technical artifact campaigns, where the audience is performing a kind of in-group activism, attempting to elevate technologies or authors they perceive as being under or misrepresented by the wider publishing industry. Indeed, this dissatisfaction with powerful market forces is at the core of most crowdfunding – a legacy, perhaps, of the service’s roots in hacker/maker cultures, which has always been frustrated with the power held by large, strategic institutions like publishers and corporations and the effects of this power on the production, valuation, and accessibility of texts. This attitude, and the avenues by which such crowds disrupt this model through broad, free dissemination and remixing of texts, can be seen in, among other examples, the community’s attitudes towards copyright and “ownership” of ideas. In “The Wealth of Networks”, Benkler argues that commons-based peer production, the means by which projects are created through disparate, structurally fluid and communally driven crowdsourced labor, is the means by which online communities are able to counter these existing structures, in which participants have little voice of their own:

The quintessential instance of commons-based peer production has been free software. Free software, or open source, is an approach to software development that is based on shared effort on a nonproprietary model. It depends on many individuals contributing to a common project, with a variety of motivations, and sharing their respective contributions without any single person or entity asserting rights to exclude either from the contributed components or from the resulting whole... The most surprising thing that the open source movement has shown, in real life, is that this simple model can operate on very different scales... The economics of this phenomenon are complex. In the larger-scale models, actual organization form is more diverse than the simple, three-person model. In particular, in some of the larger projects... a certain kind of meritocratic hierarchy is clearly present. However, it is a hierarchy that is very different in
This seemingly contradictory ethic of hierarchically meritocratic authorship and commons-based, open development is at the core of crowdfunding for interactive media. Unlike activist crowdfunding, it is openly capitalistic, working within existing models of authorship and publication rather than attempting to fully break away from existing power structures. However, it is still reliant on a revolutionary tone in that the overarching goal of the subgenre is to resist the overwhelming power of traditional publishing industries. It does so by steering the development of cultural artifacts within the community along the lines that they desire, but feel are underrepresented. In essence, this subgenre best embodies the ways in which online communities use money and labor as a rhetorical appeal to authoritative forces within (and outside of) their communities; a kind of idealistic pragmatism, where investment is used as persuasive force, with members of the community appointing trusted authors as a kind of representative official – an emissary to negotiate with existing power structures. This process is in many important ways different from the protocological approaches envisioned by Galloway in that these approaches are, ultimately, based on the development and popularization of commercial products – albeit niche ones. However, I argue that because the motivation of crowdfunding backers is largely intrinsic – focused more on the support of authors who develop the type or genre of texts that the communities value than on the development of any one individual text by itself – and because of the level of trust required of authors by backers (since the product itself is not yet designed and only exists as a promise for the performance of the community’s values through the eventual product), the act of crowdfunding (both creating and investing) is more tactical than it is commercial. Although the product itself is certainly a promising draw, the true appeal of a persuasive crowdfunding pitch lies in the ability to persuasively argue for the value of a genre of text (and the cultural and ideological values wrapped up within that text and others like it) to those strategic powers in charge of valuation (publishers, copyright
holders, market forces, etc.) using their own technologies of persuasion and valuation (such as money and commercial interest) against them.

This is uniquely apparent in one particular project, *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night* by Koji Igarashi, the famous developer of *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (a member of the subgenre of video games which he has taken to calling “Igavania”). Igarashi explained this directly in an interview prior to the project’s Kickstarter being published, saying that “after over a year of talking with just about every publisher out there, I was able to secure funding for about 90 percent of the game with the condition that I prove the market still wants an Igavania game. Kickstarter proved to be a great solution, as it would (hopefully) show that people still want an Igavania game while simultaneously providing funds for the core game”, later adding “publishers naturally drift towards what they consider to be big-budget triple-A titles, or something that's new and cutting-edge. I think it's inevitable for them to pay less attention to popular but relatively smaller titles like my previous games, which they see as a little dated now. Maybe they doubt that such titles would sell in the current market, but that's where I'm hoping this campaign will prove otherwise, and demonstrate what the market really looks like” (*Gamasutra*). The subsequent funding and excitement surrounding this project provides a sharp contrast to the response to Luckey’s sale of the Oculus Rift to Facebook; where Luckey’s collaboration with larger power structures was seen as at the expense of his collaboration with the community, Igarashi’s was accepted and encouraged from the very start. This is perhaps owing to the nature of the media itself, which has always worked by providing audiences with texts that thrive on limited but meaningful author-directed participation.

Interactive Media pitches, which can also include board games, visual novels, and other forms of audience-guided interaction, relies, more than other subgenres, on the authority and social capital granted by prior bodies of work for its authors. Trust is, curiously enough, hard to earn for profit-driven
projects like these, and is based both on the authority and ability to develop texts which can negotiate with existing power structures, and on an attitude of collaborative generosity which promises that the community will be able to shape the development of both text and community throughout the project’s development.

**Prototypical Text: Double Fine Adventure (Later Renamed to Broken Age)**

Tim Schafer’s “Double Fine Adventure” was by no means the first video game to be crowdfunded, but it was, arguably, the most influential. The funding project began on February 8, 2012, and ended on March 13, 2012. During that time, it amassed over three million dollars – well over its $400,000 goal – from over 87,000 backers. It also inspired several other similar projects – embodying the notion of a prototypical text within a genre. As Bawarshi and Rieff write about linguistic analysis of genre according to Paltridge, “the relation between texts and genres is not simply based on features internal to both, but more powerfully is based on learned, conceptual relations between ‘memory, context and frames,’ thus rendering ‘the notion of prototype as a principle of selection, organization and interpretation of genre frames’” (*Genre*, 39). *Broken Age*, then, represents perhaps the clearest example of a prototypical text, given that its moves and characteristics defined the basic structure of other, future video gaming Kickstarters. This influence is directly referenced, for example, in the video pitch for Jordan Weissman’s project *Shadowrun Returns*, where, in the opening segment of the video, Weissman is shown exiting an elevator and saying “Hey, Tim, thanks for the idea” – referring to Tim Schafer, head of Double Fine Studios - before speaking directly to the audience about his project, later going on to explain that “You know, recently on Kickstarter there’s been a couple of old game designers who wanted to bring back a genre or a particular game and they reached out to the fans for funding, and I thought, well wait a minute, I’m an old game designer, and there’s a game I would really love to make.” Double Fine’s influence can also be seen in the number of video game pitches posted to Kickstarter following its
success. On a blog post analyzing the influence of Double Fine Adventure, Kickstarter posted the metrics, demonstrating that “In the month before Double Fine, the Video Games category averaged 629 pledges per week. After Double Fine's launch, the Video Games category averaged 9,755 pledges per week, excluding pledges to Double Fine itself” and that Double Fine’s “achievements have inspired tons of press and even other projects — as of today more than 35 projects have been launched by first-time backers, and 4 have already been successfully funded. Fellow blockbuster Wasteland 2 launched after being inspired by Double Fine”. Double Fine also brought “more than 60,000 first-time backers” to the site. Their conclusion, upon reading the numbers, was that “Projects aren't fighting over a finite pool of Kickstarter dollars or backers. One project's backer isn't another project's loss. The backers that one project brings often end up backing other projects as well. Each project is not only promoting itself, but the Kickstarter ecosystem as a whole” (Blockbuster Effects, Kickstarter Blog). Indeed, as prototypical texts often do, the success of Double Fine, and the subsequent increase in attention and participation for other, related communities, shows the nature of online digital communities as well as the non-zero-sum, Commons-Based approach to creativity and community outlined by Benkler. Qualitatively speaking, too, Double Fine’s pitch itself was highly influential on the stylistic, tonal, and structural moves of other pitches within the subgenre, establishing itself as humorous, irreverent, and playfully rebellious-attitudes appreciated by the rather anarchic community of hackers, makers, and gamers.

Analysis

Unlike the pitch for Oculus or other technical artifacts, Schafer’s begins with a short, comedic skit which runs throughout his description of his project and his team. The video opens to Tim Schafer playing drums in his office before looking towards the camera and speaking directly to the audience:

*Oh, sorry, I didn’t see you there. You caught me indulging in one of my many impressive hobbies."

*My name is Tim Schafer and I am a man of many passions. Drumming, skydiving, charity or*
something, but one of the things I’m most passionate about is making games. And one of my favorite types of games to make is adventure games. But these days it seems like adventure games are a bit of a lost art form. They exist in our dreams and our memories and in Germany.

Schafer then plays out a dramatized conversation with a hypothetical fan of his, asking him to make a “point-and-click graphical adventure game”, and then loudly protesting that the genre isn’t dead. Schafer responds, “I’m on your side, but if I went to a publisher and pitched an adventure game they would laugh in my face”, to which the actor replies “But I have money and I’d buy a copy... there’s a ton of people out there who are just like me. They’d buy one too!” After a bit more banter, Schafer muses

What if there are a lot of adventure game fans out there who want an adventure game. I wonder if there’s some way that I can talk to them directly. Cut out publishers altogether. That’s when it occurred to me: Kickstarter! We can use Kickstarter to make a fan-funded old school adventure game.

As with technical artifacts, Schafer begins with a passion claim, discussing his personal love for working within a genre that seems to some like “a bit of a lost art form.” He also utilizes highly inclusive terminology – he refers to his audience directly, speaking of them as a part of his in-group with phrases like “We can use Kickstarter to make a fan-funded old school adventure game”, and “[Adventure games] exist in our dreams and our memories”, even speaking – through his skit with the prototypical fan – directly to his audience, saying “I’m on your side.” This of special note, as it demonstrates a tactical use of division to accompany the identification; in this case, setting himself and his community in opposition to large, mainstream publishers, providing a clear instance of Steigenberger’s observation of the gaming community’s motivations for donating as, in part, stemming from feelings of frustration and underrepresentation from publishers. Burke writes that identification is “compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their
unity” (*A Rhetoric of Motives*, 22). Similarly, he writes in “The Rhetorical Situation” that there are three types of identification; its use “merely as a way to establish rapport with an audience by the stressing of sympathies held in common”, “identification by antithesis, the most urgent form of congregation by segregation”, and what he calls “identification by inaccuracy” where a person’s “identification with his machines” (or nations as Burke frames it) leads to his mistaking their powers for his, and “loves himself accordingly” (268-270). Burke outlines these three identifications in order to examine the root of things like nationalism and jingoism, but they may easily apply to smaller niche communities, in this case fans of “old school adventure games.” By drawing clear sides, using terminology that is familiar to his intended audience (the idea of an “old-school adventure game”, which goes without definition throughout the video for instance), and finally presenting the opposition as a powerful force of copyright, gatekeeping, and frustration to both himself and fans of his preferred style of game, Schafer invites his audience to join him in a kind of low-stakes struggle against the wider, strategic forces of traditional publication in the medium.

His use of humor, too, serves a persuasive purpose. It at once keeps the stakes low, inviting the kind of limited financial participation that Kickstarter excels at, while still retaining the rebellious mission implied by his use of division. Mikhail Bakhtin writes that “The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and intimidation...Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations” (*Rabelais and His World*, 90), demonstrating how humor and mockery can attract a kind of revolutionary – or in this case persuasively antithetical – energy. Before, one might argue, there was a kind of serious, impotent frustration within the community to whom Schafer is speaking, as the authoritarian structures of traditional gaming publication were the sole voice in which kinds of games were made and published. Now, however, with Kickstarter, there is another avenue by which the community’s needs may be expressed. The laughter he invites throughout this video, then, is both an
invitation to participation and to release the tension. At the very least there are now alternatives, allowing the audience to feel as if they can have fun again.

Schafer then shifts focus, moving from his passion claim towards his competence claim, demonstrating both his authority to produce such a text, as well as the process by which he means to do so:

*It’s perfect. We’ve got the perfect team here at Double Fine to make it. We’ve got the inventor of the genre here, Ron Gilbert. Oh look! There he is now! Maybe he’ll help us!...But that’s only half the story. We’ll be filming the whole thing as we go! Well, I mean these guys will be here.... This is... [Paul] one of the guys from, uh... [Two Player Productions], the people making that documentary about [“Notch”, creator of “Minecraft”]...These talented documenteers will be filming the whole process from beginning to end and putting it up on the internet as we go. A high quality, serialized documentary that provides an unprecedented look into what really happens when a company like Double Fine makes a game. You know how they say you don’t want to see how the sausage gets made? Well we’re going to show you how the sausage gets made! We’re going to take our sausage and shove it in your face. Warts and all.*

More than just a feature of the campaign, this documentary also represents a move to build credibility with his audience, both by bringing in a project related to a popular, existing product (Minecraft again), and by offering transparent insight into the process of the game’s creation, inviting his viewers into his workspace, and offering them the role of an insider participant, at once providing accountability to his audience along with a meritocratic assertion of the value not just of his product, but the process itself. Just being able to watch him and his team make the game is argued to be worth the cost of admission. Beyond simply a performance of transparency in his work, the importance of the documentary as a
companion text to the game itself lies in the fact that it shows Schafer’s awareness of why people would be motivated to back his project: in absence of any guarantee of the quality, or even delivery, of a final product, Schafer must, instead, appeal to his audience’s love for, and understanding of, the genre itself. The promise of a documentary detailing his process offers audiences proof that he understands not only what they want in a text of the genre (in terms of the game itself) but that they also understand, and appreciate, the technical and rhetorical process of designing this textual artifact.

Thus far, Schafer has said little about the game itself beyond the genre to which it belongs. This is owing to two facts: first, he can’t really go into specifics as the game’s development hasn’t even begun. Second, his pitch is not an advertisement for a product, but for the process of authoring a discursive text for his community. In order to succeed in this persuasive act, Schafer cannot rely on the technical strength of his project as a thing unto itself, and must, instead, appeal to the shared, intrinsic motivations of his prospective backers. When speaking of what motivates digital labor from commons-based producers, Benkler writes, “Both economic and social aspects [of motivation] represent ‘standing’—that is, a relational measure expressed in terms of one’s capacity to mobilize resources. Some resources can be mobilized by money. Social relations can mobilize others. For a wide range of reasons— institutional, cultural, and possibly technological—some resources are more readily capable of being mobilized by social relations than by money” (*The Wealth of Networks*, 95) and that “Money-oriented motivations are different from socially oriented motivations. Sometimes they align. Sometimes they collide. Which of the two will be the case is historically and culturally contingent” (97). Schafer’s approach to raising interest, building community, and centering the development of his game as the focal point of it all, demonstrates an effective aligning of these motivations. According to Benkler, “money and honor are often, though not always, positively correlated. Being able to command a very high hourly fee for writing the requested paper is a mode of expressing one’s standing in the profession...Yet, there are modes of acquiring esteem—like writing the paper as a report for a bar
committee—that are not improved by the presence of money, and are in fact undermined by it” (97).

Both are true here. In one sense, Schafer is using his standing within the community—the high hourly fee, basically—to show his reliability and standing in the community. However, he uses the money and the force being pushed—however indirectly—against him and his community by major publishers to undermine their standing as an antagonistic out group. Following his discussion of the documentary and a brief skit, he then reasserts his audience as belonging with him by offering them power to influence the development of his game:

> Whether it goes well, or whether it all goes to hell, we’re going to show everything. Isn’t that exciting? The conversation won’t be a one way street. This is a game for adventure fans, funded by adventure fans, and we want to make it with adventure fans. You will be able to talk back to us in an exclusive online community for people who funded the game. You’ll give input on the concept art, the music, and your input will actually affect the direction the game takes. It will be like a collaboration...or more like Little Orphan Annie. Where we’re the cute little red-headed girl who sings and tap-dances for your pleasure and you’re like Daddy Warbucks, who’s like bald or something but is cool and everybody likes him. And that’s the point. If you back this Kickstarter project, you’ll be cool and everybody will like you. Guaranteed.

By explicitly stating that his audience will be able to contribute—and that their contributions will be valued in specific, tangible ways—Schafer appeals to the community’s intrinsically-motivated desire to shape the course of their community’s texts. Where Luckey implied this, Schafer says it directly. He is, per Robert Johnson’s definition, characterizing his game as a kind of user-centered technology.

According to Johnson, user-centered technologies cast users not as passive recipients of instructions from experts, but as “active participants in the design, development, and maintenance of technology”
(32) and that, in order to create a user-centered technology, the formerly-infallible expert must design the technology with a mind for “the localized situation within the user resides” (129). Ordanini et al. address this tendency in relation to crowdfunding write that, in crowdfunding, investors “participate in crowdfunding websites because they like engaging in innovative behavior...these participants are attracted by the novel way to use the underlying technology platform, particularly in the context of social networking” (22). This relates back to Alexander Galloway’s assertions about the ways in which the internet alters human identity. He writes that online identity is not theoretical, but specifically embodied in measurable ways. This measurement, called collaborative filtering, is “an extreme example of protocological organization of real human people. Personal identity is formed only on certain hegemonic patterns...the user is always suggested to be like someone else, who, in order for the system to work, is already like the user to begin with (Protocol, Location 1951). Viewed this way, he argues, “protocol gives us the ability to build a ‘warm, friendly’ technological space...through technical standardization, agreement, organized implementation, broad...adoption, and directed participation” (Location, 2304). Schafer is using his video to create a “warm, friendly technological space”. That the space is not a location, but a game, is unimportant; online, communities are not about space or time but texts.

He is, more importantly, also surrendering a measure of his authorial power to his audience by characterizing them as the “Daddy Warbucks” to his Little Orphan Annie. This juxtaposition is at the core of crowdfunding. Schafer could not have surrendered his authorial power had it not been previously afforded to him by the same powerful, strategic institutions (the publishers, in this case). However, he could not rely on this power going forward, as the success of his pitch depends, in large part, on his ability to distinguish and separate himself (and by association his community) from the protocological forces that are seen as a source of stifling frustration. This power is further reified in the conclusion of the video:
So we’re asking for [$300,000] to make the game, and [$100,000] to film it. It may seem like a lot of money, but it’s not really much for a game budget these days. It’s pretty small, actually, but we’re not scared. It’s going to be an adventure, both the process and the product... So!

What’s going to happen? No one can say for sure. But here’s my promise to you. Either the game will be great, or it will be a spectacular failure, caught on camera for everyone to see. Either way, you win. What could possibly go wrong?

Concluding with this question has the effect of concretizing Schafer’s accountability to his community. First, he explains the details behind his budget, something rarely done in traditional game publication. Second, in stating that “it’s not really much for a game budget these days”, he is both deferentially apologetic, assuring the audience that he won’t be misusing their donations, while at the same time further cementing his place within their community by promising them an adventure regardless of the outcome. It is an invitation to share in the adventure, which, above all, shows how the role of audience has shifted from recipient to participant in online places. The online audience’s identity has gone from inexpert consumers to collaborative, peer-level participants in the text’s development. While not completely democratic, readers must be treated less as an imagined, generalized, passive recipients and more as an active, intrinsically invested, experts.

Just as members of a small town have a personal stake in the preservation and beautification of a public park, working consumers contribute towards the preservation and improvement of their valued texts in the form of capital, both monetary and social. Indeed, as we will see in the coming sections, public and civic projects can be explicitly supported by crowdfunding in ways that they could not through more traditional funding. To demonstrate this need for community participation, crowdsourced texts must have the aura granted by authorship, a product of social interest overcoming the internet’s economy of attentional scarcity, to be reproduced lest they be “sterile” or unfunded. However, unlike
the painting, the theater, or the cult of the celebrity, aura online is not granted through presence or scarcity, but through persuasion and cooperation. Through this pitch, Schafer has argued – successfully – for the design-space of his text as a kind of digital commons; one that is open to admission (although not “free as in beer”, as one must still buy or back the game) but whose participation will be most rewarding to those with an already-established intrinsic interest in the act of developing the “place” of the online community.

Schafer’s success is, I argue, owing to his ability to speak to his audience as compatriots, and it provides a narrative of development where they collaborate with him to make a text in opposition to wider forces, and effectively uses the authority of his previous work to barter for monetary capital from his community. Although not equal peers, collaborating in the design of the text itself, the audience-as-collaborators he is inviting to share in his work nevertheless perform creative labor throughout the development of the game-as-text. This collaboration may, for instance, take the form of feedback and critique of the game throughout its development. Or, as the study “The Experts in the Crowd” demonstrates, even the critical act of choosing to invest or not to invest in the project depends upon a level of analytical expertise which may be honed like any other skill. In this study, Kim and Viswanathan argue that, with experienced crowdfunding backers “their expertise, if any, is likely to come from their prior investments. In this regard, they are likely to learn more from prior investments in successfully funded apps, as they get monthly updates about those apps and may be more active in promoting them... investing in successfully funded apps makes Experienced Investors more influential than investing in unsuccessfully funded ones” (17). This has demonstrable, material effects on the success of a project, as “early investments by experts serve as credible signals of quality for later investors, especially for those who are less experienced” (20). Collaboration may even take the form of parody or mockery of the text as its development unfolds. One instance of this can be seen, for example, in the case of the “Hipster Lumberjack”, the nickname given to a character model shown to backers in a video
detailing the early animations of the game. The character’s design, coupled with the unfinished quality of the animation, invited widespread mockery from online communities, who made fun of the ways that Schafer was spending the $3.3 million earned through the Kickstarter. The subsequent parodies generated remixes, memes, and, eventually, secured the Lumberjack character a role in the final game, his personality written to be a parody of the archetypal Brooklyn hipster, complete with ironic art collection and dramatic facial hair. Although none of this creative contribution from the audience results in direct, hands-on work with the actual code, art direction, or other immediate aspects of the text, their ideas, opinions, critiques, and critical readings are still a part of the development process in transparent, immediate ways. In the case of the audience as a whole, then, the $3.3 million awarded for the project is not a down payment for any one product, but a statement of faith in Schafer’s vision for his community and of desire to participate as working consumers throughout the process.

Conclusions

Chris Avellone, lead writer of several role playing video games from Black Isle Studios and later Obsidian Entertainment, is perhaps the best embodiment of the push and pull between authorial power and audience demand in online communities. He is a man who became a stretch goal worth $150,000, providing an unusually quantifiable look at how much a community values the voice of a trusted authority figure within itself. The crowdfunded game Torment: Tides of Numenera by inXile studios earned over $4 million dollars, well over its comparatively modest $900,000 funding goal. As with many projects that exceed their initial funding request, Torment proposed a number of “stretch goals” – additional features to be added to the final product should these funding milestones be reached. Stretch goals provide an interesting measurement for the values of a given community, as they narrow focus down to a limited set of goals and features that shape and modify the product. Where the project itself is, then, a measure of what kind of texts a community demands, the stretch goals are a measure of
what the community wants the eventual text itself to look like. Chris Avellone, one of the writers of Torment’s spiritual predecessor, Planescape: Torment, was not initially a part of the new project. An update on inXile’s web page explains why they did not have him on their team at the outset, and why, at the game’s $3.5 million stretch goal (following the success of the previous milestone at $3.35 million), they were able to bring him on board:

*Of course, from the start, we hoped Chris could contribute to Torment as well. But as recently as a couple weeks ago (16 days to be precise), we didn’t know whether Torment would even fund. And besides, Chris’s commitment to Project Eternity made it unclear whether he’d have the time. Given his key role in Planescape™: Torment, and the respect he has earned from the game’s fans, we didn’t want to even hint that Chris might be involved unless we were certain it would be possible. Our unexpectedly strong start – because of you – made it an option we could explore.*

Key to this explanation is the respect from the game’s fans mentioned by inXile. Where previous stretch goals for the project expanded features within the game’s content – additional levels within the game, storylines and technical content, etc. – Avellone’s voice alone was deemed valuable enough to merit its own reward tier. This is especially noteworthy as the other goal of similar caliber based on adding a member to the team was for the addition of famous fantasy novelist Patrick Rothfuss. Where Rothfuss’s fame in a different medium provided his value to the project, however, Avellone’s creative contributions – his authorial value – were situated solely within the community itself. This was not the only crowdfunded game to which Avellone was attached as a stretch goal. He was also brought on to write for The Bard’s Tale IV, also by inXile as the game’s $1.9 Million stretch goal, and for Larian Studio’s Divinity: Original Sin II. On Larian’s page, they announced his joining the team, again, in the context of his reputation within the community:
He’s a legend among RPG fans, with some of the most impressive credentials in the world of games writing... and now he’s agreed to help us bring the characters of D:OS2 to life!... Before we launched our Kickstarter campaign, we asked the community what sort of reward and ideas they had in mind for our campaign. You guys came up with some interesting stuff, and one of the highest-voted ideas was getting Chris Avellone on board as a writer... This is another great example of how a Kickstarter community can affect the development of a game in a positive way. We are all looking forward to what Chris will come up with, as much as many of you will be.

These press releases, again, are valuable in that they demonstrate not only the exchange of social capital (Avellone’s reputation and body of prior work) for monetary capital in a direct way, but also for the rhetorically potent exchange of power between author, audience, and back again. Larian, inXile, and other such projects offer up a portion of the control afforded them by their role as authors of a community’s texts by asking or inferring what the audience wants from the development of the game. Then the audience gives voice to its demands, either through direct voting or through donations toward a stretch goal, so that, if successful, they can then return that authorial power to bring in a new voice; one whom they trust to shape the text along the values that they believe he represents. Not only that, but the performance of this exchange – the process of authors bartering power back and forth like this – builds trust and additional social capital, both for the studios who run the project (since this is evidence that they listen to their audience) and for Avellone himself (each time he is a successfully bartered stretch goal his social capital increases).

Video games are an interactive medium. Perhaps more than most other kinds of text, they value the active participation of their audience to shape and engage with the formation of a story or experience. Even so, they are not completely transparent or collaborative; the voice and vision of a trusted author (or team of authors) is needed to provide a contextual framework within which the
audience is able to make a series of limited, but hopefully meaningful, choices. This is seen within the texts themselves, and also, interestingly, within the process of crowdfunding for this subgenre as a whole. Where other subgenres rally their communities with promises of morally or technically meaningful participation, interactive media makes the creative process itself a kind of play, the participation in which is seen as valuable almost as much as the final product itself. This is especially apparent in Schafer’s crowdfunding pitch where he argues that even should the process of developing the game fail, the stakes for his viewers are so low that even the spectacle of failure will be entertaining enough to justify the investment. Michele deCerteau writes:

> As unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their signifying practices something that might be considered similar to the "wandering lines" ("ignes d'erre") drawn by the autistic children studied by F. Deligny (17): ‘indirect’ or ‘errant’ trajectories obeying their own logic (The Practice of Everyday Life, xviii).

He later writes that “games, which as operations are disjunctive, because they produce differentiating events, give rise to spaces where moves are proportional to situations... They exercise that function precisely because they are detached from those everyday combats which forbid one to ‘show his hand’ and whose stakes, rules, and moves are too complex... If we observe a formalization of tactics in these games... we gain a preliminary body of material concerning the kinds of rationality proper to the practice of spaces-spaces that are closed and ‘historicized’ by the variability of the events to be treated” (23). In the context of the crowdfunding of games – and of crowdfunding as a game – we therefore see the signifying practices of these communities. The scale of both investment and development are low stakes enough that authors can allow their audience to use the development of their project as a space of play, and audience’s level of risk is so low that, properly argued, even the potential failure of a project can be
imbued with its own worth. It is also, as the number of such projects grows with each passing year, an increasingly valuable measure of how authorship is created through the myth-building of cult value.

Schafer’s pitch worked precisely because he was able to dwell within two worlds at once – the world of insiders to video game publishing and of outsiders without a voice. “The operational models of popular culture,” deCerteau writes, “cannot be confined to the past, the countryside, or primitive peoples. They exist in the heart of the strongholds of the contemporary economy. Take, for example, what in France is called la perruque, ‘the wig.’ La perruque is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job... the worker who indulges in la perruque actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit” (25). Schafer’s persuasive victory was in his ability to convince his audience that he was indulging in a kind of commons-based la perruque. Although for profit, it was for his own at the expense of traditional publishers. Although hoping to succeed, the real victory was in the creative process – in the chance to make the kind of game that had fallen out of fashion with those who wield strategic power over the community. And, although the time and creativity – the currency of the internet – was his own to spend, it was the voice of his community that would, seemingly, be represented.

Publications

David Bolter and Richard Grusin, write that “remediation” is the representation of one medium in another, wherein “the content of any medium is always another medium...the electronic medium is not set in opposition to painting, photography, or printing; instead the computer is offered as a new means of gaining access to these older materials...the electronic version justifies itself by granting access to the older media” (Remediation, 45) and that “the very act of remediation...ensures that the older
medium cannot be entirely effaced” (47). This is certainly true with interactive media like video games relative to traditional (often) print-based publications. The book, the radio broadcast (and later the podcast), the television program, the documentary and other media all bear traces of their predecessors even as they explore the different affordances new technology allows. Even the internet, itself both place and modality, bears the scars of remediated media, with the same old content being offered through similar means of interaction; a novel read on the screen is, in many ways, the same as it is on the printed page – at least in terms of content and in the relationship between author and audience. A film adaptation may, after all, offer different sensory affordances than the novel upon which it was based, but the viewer is still engaging with the text as a (relatively) passive recipient of the author’s vision and voice. To discount the differences permitted (or restricted) by different affordances would be irresponsible, of course, but it is important to trace the ways in which new technologies allow us to do the same old things in new and exciting ways.

This is the case with publications through crowdfunding, not just in that they embody a new venue for the production and publication of novels, documentaries, movies, or serialized broadcasts from every modality, but in that crowdfunding also represents a remediation of the traditional style of publication as a discourse community. Publications – that is, any media whose engagement does not predicate active participation from the audience beyond reading/watching/listening – are a subgenre of crowdfunding that is most like older models of creative, symbolic-analytic work. Where interactive media and technological artifacts create places of active, collaborative participation throughout the development of their texts, in effect selling the process, publications are more about the creative vision of an author or small team of authors to generate a textual product. Where other subgenres petition for active participation from their working consumers in the hopes that a type of project or voice will be heard, publications instead petition for the voices of a single or small group of creative workers. In short,
when authors go to Kickstarter to fund a publication, they are petitioning their audiences for the right to the author function.

Prototypical Text: Bring Reading Rainbow Back for Every Child Everywhere

In many creative Kickstarters, nostalgia is a kind of currency. LeVar Burton, star of the publically broadcast children's television show, *Reading Rainbow*, pitched what was, in effect, a remediation of the show for a digital platform. His Kickstarter, titled “Bring Reading Rainbow Back for Every Child Everywhere”, (hereafter shortened simply to *Reading Rainbow* for the sake of brevity) was posted to Kickstarter on May 28th, 2014, asking for a million dollars. It closed on July 2, 2014 with more than $5 million raised. Following its conclusion, the Huffington Post summarized some highlights of the campaign:

> In just one day, the campaign had met its original target and after ending its month long-run on Kickstarter last week, Burton managed to raise over $5.4 million dollars through the Internet fundraising website. While that number isn't the most raised by any campaign on the site...it did set a record for the most backers, with over 100,000 people buying into the revamped literary show.

The vast amount of money received coupled with the number of records set by this project would, I believe, justify its classification in this study as a prototypical text. However, there is an additional factor surrounding the donors themselves that effectively demonstrate both the nature of Kickstarter as a kind of metagenre – a community unto itself where other, smaller discourse communities gather and circulate – as well as showing how authority, money, and reputation are exchanged throughout the digital medium. Following *Reading Rainbow*’s placement into the top five most lucrative Kickstarter projects, Burton posted the following onto the site’s blog:
This afternoon [Friday, June 27, 2014], the teams behind every other Kickstarter in the Top 5 – Pebble, OUYA, Pono and Veronica Mars – are all stepping up to help us go even farther. Every single one of them...Starting right now, you’ll find four new LIMITED EDITION rewards, one from each of the other projects, created just to help our campaign.

This update came right on the heels of another massive – but atypical – bit of sponsorship from Seth McFarlane who had pledged to match every donation to the project made through Kickstarter up to a max of one million dollars. Burton wrote to his audience that, “Hundreds of you have written and commented to tell us that you’re increasing -- even doubling -- your pledges to take advantage of the matching. That means everything to us, and I hope you'll be proud of what we accomplish together.”

Both of these updates show, in addition to people’s love for Reading Rainbow, how money and authority interconnect, potentially strengthening one another, in online communities. The support offered by McFarlane – I argue owing both to his celebrity and to the money itself – provided the rhetorical weight to convince backers from the audience to increase donations, or to donate where they otherwise may not have. Taken together, these moves were, at least in part, able to help Reading Rainbow bring in an additional million dollars on top of the million donated by McFarlane. As a publication, therefore, Reading Rainbow represents a kind of center point for the different subgenres of crowdfunding, combining activism, interactivity, technology, and traditional modes of authorship and authority. It also represents the uniquely contradictory tones of crowdfunding work, in that it relies on both nostalgia and innovation as well as disruption and reification to generate the social capital needed to win over the audience and build itself into a community.

Analysis

Like many crowdfunding pitches, Reading Rainbow’s Kickstarter opens with a short skit. In it, LeVar Burton arrives at the office of an elementary school, asking the stunned occupants for directions
to a classroom where he’ll be giving the pitch. After being met with only stunned silence from faculty and students alike, he eventually says, apologetically, that he can find the room himself. The receptionist, a man looking to be in his early to mid-thirties, watches Burton go with a wonderstruck look and then, faintly, sings the first two lines of the show’s theme song to himself. The direct reference to the older show is more than just a callback to establish the content of the video; it’s a statement about the power of nostalgia, and the shared, communal experience that the show, as a text, created. 

The unifying force of both the show and of books in general is repeated throughout the pitch. Following the skit, LeVar Burton begins his pitch:

Hi, I’m LeVar Burton. And I’m here in Room 24 and here on Kickstarter, so that together we can bring Reading Rainbow back for every child. Everywhere. We’re creating an unlimited library of books and video field trips for today’s digitally connected kids, delivered through browsers, right into schools and homes, everywhere. And I want to make this completely free to classrooms in need. That’s right. You heard me. Free. How? Well, the answer is you. You’ve already helped create terrific films and leading edge tech products. I’m asking you to join with me in having an impact on this next generation of children. The same way we may have had an impact on you.

As with the previous two pitches I’ve discussed, Burton situates himself as being in collaboration with his audience. Not only does he address his viewer directly, using the pronoun “you”, he also deliberately emphasizes his prior, more recent accomplishments as the fruit of the audience’s labors as much as his. The use of empowering, collaborative language, the downplaying of his own personal accomplishments (notice he says “may have had an impact”, the only hedging in the entire introduction, when referring to himself, using more certain and confident language when speaking of his audience helping him). He invites readers here to imagine the influence his show had exerted on their lives in order to invite them into the shared, communal place established around the text.
The implication here is that anybody who would be interested in supporting the new publication would do so because of the impact the old one had on them, establishing a community based on that shared sense of importance and arguing that such a feeling can be, with their help, passed along to another child. Davies writes that “crowdfunding could be said to provide a context, or occasion, for communities to request money for projects as well as an established process for how to do so” (*Civic Crowdfunding*, 44). This is certainly true in the case of Reading Rainbow, but more than that, the memories of the show itself – and the impact it had on viewers of the new Kickstarter project – also provide important context to give the pitch rhetorical weight. The audience is, after all, already established due to the memories of a prior text on a different medium. The remediation of this text into an online space relies on these memories to build credibility enough to invite donation: anybody who didn’t have some strong memories associated with the older show – enough to respond on an emotional level to Burton’s allusion to having an impact on the viewer – would probably not donate in the first place, or even care to watch the video at all. Davies goes on to argue that “These two features of contemporary crowdfunding...ubiquitous master narratives and the invisibility of work are important starting points in analyzing which groups are best served by the current infrastructure” (43), and “a large number of users of civic crowdfunding platforms believe that the civic quality of a project relates to the overall goals of the organization / person involved, rather than the production of a specific type of good, since many of the private good projects involved fundraising for the maintenance or organizational costs of non-profit organizations” (60). In the case of “Reading Rainbow”, the good itself possesses a kind of civic quality, evidenced by the viewer’s own personal experiences. This shared sense of civic quality, in turn, establishes feelings of community and collaboration around the text. Burton continues with his pitch:

*For thirty years we’ve excited generations of children about books. We’ve helped open the door to the world of the written word and through video field trips connected those books to the*
world in which you live. Ever since the show went off the air in 2009, I’ve heard from so many people on Twitter, Facebook, and people that I meet on the street every day that quality trusted educational content is fairly scarce in the current media landscape – that Reading Rainbow needs to come back for today’s kids.

This reference to the prior show supplements the feelings of identification engendered in the audience. Civic crowdfunding, according to Davies, may represent “an opportunity to activate latent social capital by giving a community an opportunity to uncover a demand for a shared resource or to engage a community in a collective problem-solving process” (107). Although Davies was framing the argument in terms of direct activism, this motivating factor, the “Gap” claim to use Connor and Muranen’s terminology, both introduces a problem and demonstrates how the project can solve it. Even if the viewer as an individual is not one of those people who reached out to Burton over social media following the original show’s cancellation, the sense of identification – of community – based around a shared feeling of positive influence from the older program speaks to the project’s importance even as it establishes a sense of community. The hypothetical viewer is likely to respond to this gap claim by imagining the loss of the show as a loss for the younger generation of children. “I was inspired by this show”, he or she may think, “but it’s off the air, meaning today’s children won’t have the same feelings of inspiration.” Coupled with the collaborative language used in his introduction, Burton’s pitch argues that his audience can enact a kind of symbolic analytic labor to help solve this problem. The work itself, in this case, involves donating to the project; invisible labor, but no less powerful in its effects.

Next, Burton frames his project as a remediation, an update of the old text for modern affordances, using the language of innovation and progress so popular on Kickstarter, and among the maker movements in general:
But what does that mean? Thirty minutes on TV was yesterday’s world. In today’s world, today’s kids want today’s technology. Two years ago, we took the first step. We launched the all-new Reading Rainbow iPad App that brings hundreds of quality interactive books and video field trips right into their laps. I am incredibly proud that over thirteen million books and video field trips have been enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of children on tablets. And that we’re the number one educational app for kids; however, just being on tablets simply won’t get the job done for way too many of our families. This Kickstarter campaign is about reaching every web-connected child. Universal access. Thousands of more books than we have now. And hundreds of more video field trips.

This move does more than just lay out a concrete plan for the project’s future. It, in effect, utilizes the persuasive efficacy of remediation discussed by Bolter and Grusin in order to make the project feel simultaneously nostalgic and innovative; modern and familiar. They write that those who create electronic remediations “seem to want to emphasize the difference rather than erase it…the electronic version is offered as an improvement, although the new is still justified in terms of the old and seeks to remain faithful to the older medium’s character” (Remediation, 46) and that our culture “conceives of each medium or constellation of media as it responds to, redeploy, competes with, and reforms other media” (55). Similarly, Alexander Reid writes that “Texts are interconnected; clearly they are references for one another in countless ways…at the site of intersection between two texts, at the point of quotation, it becomes possible to study the process of exchange” (The Two Virtuals, 132). In other words, the new Reading Rainbow is “quoting” the old Reading Rainbow by remediating it to a digital platform. It does not propose radical changes – or indeed, any substantive changes at all – to the text itself while, at the same time, describing large-scale shifts to the modality through which the text is delivered.
The innovation in *Reading Rainbow* is in the broader scale of access afforded by the medium. This is a comfortable remediation for the audience, whose participatory buy-in was largely owing to feelings of personal nostalgia for their own experiences with the old show. To propose changes to the text would potentially alienate the viewers by raising doubts about how familiar the end result will actually be. However, to avoid any promises of innovation would not only raise doubts about the “point” of bringing back the show at all, it would deny the hypermediacy – the seeming invisibility of media – that, according to Bolter and Grusin, draws people to new technologies in the first place. They write, “the rhetoric of remediation favors immediacy and transparency, even though as the medium matures it offers new opportunities for hypermediacy” (60). This Kickstarter embodies that, succeeding through its ability to call upon the hypermediacy of the digital and the stable authority of the television (and Burton’s celebrity). In fact, the very affordances of the project itself reflect this apparent contradiction of innovation and stagnation – and accessibility versus restriction. Although framed in terms of civic good and “universal access”, the reality of the project is that it has taken a text that was once published freely through public broadcasting and remediated it into one that is closed off behind a paid app on various digital devices. Indeed, issues of access plague Burton’s claim of universality, as poor classrooms and students are more likely to own a television set than a tablet or laptop. Again, however, this contrast is more a matter of changing technical affordances, and the effect that such changes have on the social and cultural landscapes into which they are brought. The strength of this pitch is, as Davies argued is often the case with civic projects, not in the actual civic affordances of the project itself, but in the ability of the pitch’s author to persuasively argue for the idea behind the text as being rooted in the public good. Although not published through public broadcasting (although one may argue that the vouchers promised to public education represent a means of doing so while still drawing upon the affordances of the digital medium), and thus not a “civic” project in the literal sense, Burton’s ability to leverage the lexical, generic, and technical moves of civic work, coupled with his ability to persuade his
audience of the *civic-minded ideals* seemingly motivating the project means that the pitch is, despite the realities of its publication, a part of the civic genre – at least as far as the discourse community to whom he is addressing is concerned.

Burton returns to the rhetoric of activism, discussing his three long-term, civic goals for the project. He claims that the program seeks to do three things: “One, develop a web-enabled Reading Rainbow that reaches into our homes. Two, create a classroom version with the tools our teachers need, such as supplemental learning materials. And three, we’re going to subsidize the cost to classrooms, so our cash-strapped schools can access ‘Reading Rainbow’ for free.” He then, however, having established the civic, technical, and social credentials of the project, turns to the personal needs of his audience:

*Classrooms, PCs, Android, TVs, and free to those in need. It’s a huge undertaking and I can’t do it alone, nor frankly should I have to. Reading Rainbow has always been made possible, as the saying goes, “By viewers like you.” So together we truly can bring Reading Rainbow back for every child, everywhere. And if you decide to join me on this mission to educate the next generation, there’s nothing wrong with picking up some cool swag and some one of a kind rewards. Want me to read your favorite stories to your family? Done. Personally autograph posters showing you made this happen? Done. Star in a new video field trip with me? Done again. Kick back with me at Comic-Con? Done. Skype with me? Record your outgoing voicemail? Have dinner together? Done, done, and done. I might even let you wear this [Burton then displays the visor worn by his character on Star Trek: The Next Generation]. So, let’s do this y’all. Together we can create and deliver a proven tool for encouraging the love of reading to millions of children. We can genuinely change the world one children’s book at a time. Reading Rainbow is back for every child, everywhere, but you don’t have to take my word for it. I’ll see you next time.*
Here he explicitly barges his celebrity for donations. There are, according to Best et al., five “types” of crowdfunding projects: donation, reward, equity, lending and royalty, each defined by the type of project and the rewards the audience can expect for their donations. Davies, citing Best, expands these to include “Civic” crowdfunding, which is defined as “projects that produce some non-rival benefits that serve either the non-excludable public or broad sections of it” (Davies, 26). According to Ryan Safner, in rewards-based crowdfunding, such as Kickstarter, “crowdfunding allows backers to select the creative work they wish to contribute to, as well as the amount of funding. In exchange, backers can get specific rewards for their contribution. In effect, this creates the possibility for price-discrimination...By charging different prices to different consumers, creators are able to appropriate more of the social value of their creations” (Safner, 22-23). In this model, backers “do not purchase the final product, they contribute towards making the product happen and purchase rewards” (28). There is, again, a hybridization occurring in Burton’s campaign then; just as he utilized nostalgia and innovation, he also drew upon generosity and self-interest, in effect running both a civic campaign as well as a rewards-based campaign. This is less important, however, than what this hybridizing represents; a merging of the audience’s own interests to the civic potential of the campaign. In other words, Burton has linked the viewer’s personal desires (to spend time with a celebrity, to wear a piece of memorabilia from a favorite show, etc.) to their community’s civic desires. He has also, most importantly, unified a disparate crowd around several different discourse-defining texts, linking Star Trek fans to fans of literature to fans of Reading Rainbow to parents to education activists. He has created a kind of lodestone, a central hub of texts around which a vast community of participants may congregate and contribute. More than the previously discussed prototypical texts, Burton created – and expanded – a community through remediation.
Conclusions

There is no genre, technical or textual, that is native to the internet. Rather, there are only a network of remediations, altered by the different affordances allowed by the digital, certainly, but not innovative in the sense that they represent entirely new “types” of textuality. A book published for the screen, while offering different embodied experience for the reader, is not possessing of any inherent differences. What these affordances allow, however, is a different array of possibility for interaction between author and audience. Moreover, they allow for a different measuring of authorial authority – one that is largely based on the simultaneous embracing and rejection of older modes of publication. As I briefly mentioned in Chapter One, Kathleen Fitzpatrick discusses how technical modalities and affordances affect everything about the texts produced within:

The disjuncture between [older models of publishing] and Internet-based publishing is immediately obvious: while access to a publisher’s imprimatur is intentionally limited in print, anyone with the right hardware, software, and network connection could simply publish anything online...the problem, however, with this kind of online reproduction of the systems that govern print publishing is that the Internet operates within a completely different set of technological affordances, which have in turn helped to foster a very different understanding of the creation of authority. In contrast with print, the scarcities involved in Internet-based publishing are not material; they are, rather, shortages of time and attention...experienced by those who are looking for information rather than those who provide it. As a result...the publisher-derived imprimatur declaring selectivity has gradually become less important online than the imprimatur that is conferred by community...it is far less important to a given reader that some authorizing producer has declared a text to be of value...than it is that someone whom the reader knows, even if only by reputation, has read and recommended the text...liking and
linking both enact a new kind of selectivity in creating a mode of community-based
authorization, a selectivity that is imposed at the point of consumption rather than production
(“Beyond Metrics”, 453).

Indeed, Reading Rainbow’s Kickstarter – along with several others within the subgenre – demonstrate a shift of affordances and authorization. After all, it was the cancellation of the original show – no doubt, the audience may speculate, at the hands of executives or politicians in suits – that prompted the show’s revival online, where the new affordances offered by the more “modern” medium of the digital will, it is implied, offer greater access, exposure, and creative freedom for the show. Had Burton (or Schafer, or Luckey and so on) been supported or directly endorsed by publications or television broadcasters, I argue that the Kickstarter would not have gotten such support.

Where some projects draw authority from their ability to enact la perruque with their publishers, Burton’s publication – along with others in the subgenre – gains authority by embracing the relative freedom offered by the digital and eschewing the restrictive authorizations of older publication models while simultaneously drawing on the credentialing power such models have afforded them in the past. We see this, for instance, in the Kickstarter for Matter, an online journal for investigative reporting. In their pitch they argue that, “Longform investigative journalism about these topics is really important. It’s a really good way, and sometimes the only way, of getting to the truth about very complex ideas that are shaping the world around us...the trouble is that nobody [in online journalism] is built to produce this stuff”. Similarly, in the pitch for Plympton: Serialized Fiction for Digital Readers they argue that “This is a turbulent time for fiction. The major publishing houses are continually cutting the size of their fiction lists and most magazines have stopped publishing fiction altogether. Digital publishing offers an enticing new venue for lovers of fiction, but for the most part it cannot yet provide writers with the support that allows great writing to flourish. This isn’t just a problem for writers. It’s a
problem for anyone who likes to read.” And in Zach Braff’s pitch for his movie *Wish I was Here* he answers the question of, “Why haven’t you directed a sequel to *Garden State*” by saying “There are money guys willing to finance the project, but in order to protect their investment, they’re insisting on having final cut. Also, they want to control how the film is cast”. Each of these projects, like *Reading Rainbow*, breaks away from the selectivity-based authorizing methodology of publishers by drawing attention to the creative constraints caused by the limited affordances of older technologies. In each of these examples, we see how, as Fitzpatrick argues, the projects’ value as texts worth investing in is established not through the limited accessibility of older models of publication where scarcity of texts – juxtaposed against being made available through publication in the first place – is what lends them their authoritative power, but in their authors’ ability to create *already valuable* texts *despite* the controlling, authorizing forces of older modalities.

The affordances of the digital medium become a persuasive force unto themselves, and, when seeking to fund an online publication, the author’s best bet is to demonstrate the strength not of his or her text, but of its ability to make use of these affordances to better the author’s community. Even so, the scarcity-based valuation of older models is not entirely discarded in online publication. As Fitzpatrick argues, there is still scarcity of time and attention, even in these online places. Therefore, the valuating processes of older modalities does still carry persuasive weight online, if only as a kind of symbolic shortcut where the necessary recognition of reputation from the audience is needed. The important thing to examine is the ways in which reputation is established through prior works within older modalities. This is where the “remediation” of crowdfunding, and digital publications in general, becomes apparent. Despite the informal, friendly tone with which Burton addresses his viewers, they do not know him personally, by and large. The strength of his recommendation (or the strength of recommendations by the other top five Kickstarter projects) comes from the reputation afforded to him by the community.
The source of this reputation, however, is the shared, communal experience of *Reading Rainbow* itself – the text published through the now-deficient modality of televised public broadcasting. We see this use of nostalgia – of the authority granted by the past – in Plympton’s pitch as well, where, in their video’s opening, they state that “Anna Karenina wasn’t a book. Neither was *Great Expectations*, *Heart of Darkness*, or *Madame Bovary*. They came in a form that was vital, popular, and social. They came in updates....Today we get updates from everywhere, and we look everywhere for new things to read.” In making the comparison between serialized fiction and social media, the authors of the video draw on the authority of “classically” authored text within the western canon while simultaneously appealing to the remediated modality of digital social media, arguing that both are equally “vital, popular, and social”, all of which are key affordances of digital media. Kickstarter shows is that, through the affordances for transparency and audience participation granted by the digital, even the process of production can be a product for consumption. Taking these examples together, we can see how online publication tactically uses, even as it rebukes, the valuating power of older modalities. Even though these new texts make use of similar technical and rhetorical affordances to earlier models of print-based or televised publications (and the ability of such familiar genres to quickly show audiences their value for the community) they must acknowledge the affordances and values of the new, digital modes through the ways in which such texts are authored, accessed, or published; they must strike the balance between the familiar and the innovative, the open and the exclusive, and the new and the old. Crowdfunding shows us how the digital remediates even the writing process. But, as Bolter and Grusin argue, this is nothing new; it’s merely a different lens through which to view what has always happened in publication.
Civic Projects

This is perhaps the broadest, least defined category of crowdfunding pitches, because it encapsulates an array of smaller-scale, geographically limited, or socially driven pitches and projects. Among this final category are projects relating to activism, local community restoration projects, supplementary projects for existing institutions or programs, public service ventures, one-time events or gatherings, activist publications or reports, and other, similarly difficult to classify projects. Kickstand’s Kickstarter, for instance, would be a text from this subgenre, as would academic or critical ventures, or efforts to fund a protest with a specific city, community, or modality for publication. Although the prototypical text will be an activist publication, I have refrained from focusing on activism alone for this category, keeping the scope broad intentionally for two key reasons; first, as we have seen, there are seeds of activism – or at least the desire to affect communal changes, in each of the previous subgenres. Indeed, the drive towards transgression – towards tactical movements to create change within one’s community is a driving force for almost all crowdfunding. Second, and more importantly, is the comparatively limited reach and scope of such projects contrasted against the social and political impacts they hold. While almost all successful Kickstarters boast that they will create some kind of positive change, through future-centric language, promises of certain outcomes, and the addressing of some known gap or lack within a given community, these projects’ create change that, while more modest in scale, are measurable and visible most directly.

There is also the question of modality; the projects within this category represent the simplest modal shift from old, traditional media and rhetoric to an online venue. Kickstand’s survival is a “product” wholly rooted in the material world, with Kickstarter acting as a kind of digital support for that outcome. A protest, similarly, exists for a moment in time, the change to scenery and geography and social situations impossible to ignore. Even a publication which, unlike civically motivated projects like
Reading Rainbow, is solely focused on achieving some kind of measurable social change serves an altogether different purpose than the mere process/product created upon successful funding. Paradoxically, these projects, while more recognizable to a wider audience or range of communities than the comparatively niche, specialized nature of previous categories, typically are far more modest in terms of their funding goals, outcomes, and participation from the communities. Kim et al., in one study, find that:

[T]echnology-related projects in game and technology tend to attract the vast majority of investments outside of their home regions. This shows sharp contrast with venture capital investments that are geographically concentrated. Hence, crowdfunding may become a more viable option for promising technology entrepreneurs located outside the three centers of venture capital activity: San Francisco, Boston, and New York (“Does Crowdfunding Democratize Access to Capital”, 21).

I will argue, however, that, while geographic concentration is one (and not an unimportant) measure of different types of crowdfunding projects, it serves more as a media for meaning-making and valuation than as a deciding factor. While someone from Florida is, for instance, unlikely to invest in a project for urban renewal in Nebraska if he or she has no personal ties to the state, the communal effects represented by the success or failure of such projects may manifest in other ways depending on the goals of the project.

This section, therefore, will focus on a prototypical text that, although not situated in the geographical local, is highly relevant for the digital local. I will, in the latter parts of the section, compare the text to other, different manifestations of the local, but what each of these examples will have in common, the overarching goal of affecting change to the social and political geography of a community, is the tie that connects them, regardless of whether that community is digital, textual, or spatial. The
text, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* by Anita Sarkeesian, could easily be classified as a publication. However, I will argue that the specific, stated goal of the project is not the creation of a text itself, but the ensuing cultural change and dialogue that the author hopes to create through its publication. The text is about a community, not of it, and, as a result, was able to generate monetary interest, academic accolades, mainstream support, and no shortage of controversy.

**Prototypical Text: Tropes vs. Women in Video Games**

Although far more modest in funding and scope than the previously discussed prototypical texts, Anita Sarkeesian’s *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, a part of her online lecture channel Feminist Frequency, is perhaps the most famous for the largest range of discourse communities. It is also, due to its critical nature, use of feminist theory to conduct analysis, and humanities-driven brand of political activism, the most likely to resonate within the academic community. The series, which Sarkeesian pitched from May, 17 – June 16, 2012, earned close to $160,000, exceeding its initial goal of just $6000 by several orders of magnitude. The series, as well as the discussions and controversies surrounding it, earned widespread, international recognition for Feminist Frequency and Sarkeesian; in the site’s 2014 annual report they cited, among other accomplishments, Sarkeesian’s winning the “Humanist of the Year” award from the Humanist Committee at Harvard, speaking at the United Nations conference on online harassment, speaking engagements at several conferences, video game development studios and colleges and universities, and the publication of several additional articles and activist projects (Feminist Frequency 2014 Annual Report, 8). Also boasting that, as of 2015, the series Tropes vs. Women had received over 4 million views on YouTube alone. Nate Carpenter of *The Journal of Women & Language* favorably reviewed the series’ publications as of 2013, and Sarkeesian herself has since been written about and interviewed, both in niche video gaming publications and mainstream cultural publications such as The New York Times and Rolling Stone. In Rolling Stone’s interview, reporter Sean Collins said
that Sarkeesian called herself “a folk villain to a certain subset of gamers, and you’ve become a folk hero to another” illustrating how, unlike Burton’s and Schafer’s projects, which use pre-existing celebrity as a rhetorical tool for crowdfunding, Sarkeesian’s celebrity was created – or at least enhanced – due to crowdfunding. Later, in response to questions about the harassment she’s received from various online trolls and abusers, Sarkeesian explained the cultural impact of her series and why some from among the gaming community’s response was so vicious, arguing that “what’s happening is that the industry is changing. This consciousness-raising is happening. People are starting to acknowledge that the industry has a problem with women...Communities are starting to determine what is appropriate behavior within their communities” and that her detractors are “trying to hold on to this status quo, this illusion that gaming is for men, that it can never change, that it can never be more inclusive than that” (Rolling Stone, 2014). Sarkeesian, however, insisted early in the interview that such responses were never the intention of the series as a way of “pulling feminist theory out of academia into a more public space for a wider audience”. Indeed, the pitch itself is overtly activist in its stated goals. However, it does not specifically point to the gaming community’s textual artifacts – the games themselves - on the whole as being in need of change; rather, the goal is to use the medium to foster conversation about wider sociopolitical changes. This powerful reaction, both supporting and against, Sarkeesian and her project demonstrate the ways in which communities intersect through texts – sometimes in antagonistic ways – and how, even in the Digital Local, cross-cultural communications can, even as they use the same texts, formulate worldviews based on radically different values and assumptions. It also demonstrates the potential kickstarted projects have for tangible cultural change. As she said, after all, there are powerful changes occurring in the cultures and communities surrounding video games, and in the ways that larger, more mainstream groups discuss them as textual artifacts. In studying Sarkeesian’s pitch, and the passionate – and sometimes vitriolic – reaction from different discourse communities, we see how crowdfunding can serve as both rhetoric and rhetorical situation – the tool for change and the change
itself—and how communities may use it to formulate, interact, rally for a cause, or even engage in partisan conflicts.

**Analysis**

Sarkeesian’s video opens in much the same way as the other prototypical texts previously discussed. She introduces herself, her project, and explains the “Gap” it is meant to fill within a discourse community:

> Have you ever noticed that, with a few notable exceptions, basically all female characters in video games fall into a small handful of clichés and stereotypes? I’m Anita Sarkeesian and I run the video web series, Feminist Frequency. As a pop culture critic, I look at movies, TV shows, comic books, and, of course, video games. In addition to being loads of fun to play, research has found that gaming can improve problem solving skills, teamwork, creative thought, and multitasking, and improve hand/eye coordination, and enhance perceptual and cognitive abilities. Unfortunately, in addition to all of these benefits, many video games tend to amplify sexist, and downright misogynist ideas about women. In this particular project, which I’m calling Tropes vs. Women in Video Games, I’m gonna create a series of five videos that look at, and deconstruct, the most common and the most stereotypical representations of women in games.

Video games are an integral, and growing part of our popular culture today, and, as with all pop culture media, the gaming industry is playing a role in helping to shape our society, either by challenging, or more often reinforcing existing values, beliefs, and behaviors.

Unlike the previous prototypical texts, however, this pitch, as with many similar texts from the subgenre, lacks a “Passion Claim.” Sarkeesian does define herself as an insider within the gaming community, but she does so in a later update to the Kickstarter’s front page rather than making the claim in her video. On the site, she writes, in response to what would sadly prove to be only the first
wave of harassment, that “I love playing video games but I’m regularly disappointed in the limited and limiting ways women are represented... As a gamer, a pop culture critic and a fan, I’m always working to balance my enjoyment of media while simultaneously being critical of problematic gender representations.” The absence of this passion claim, along with the listing of utilitarian benefits to video gaming and the cultural importance of the medium as a whole (which she weighs as contemporary to other modalities of pop-culture), situates Sarkeesian’s discourse community in broader terms than the more narrowly focused emphasis on niche discourse communities like “gamers”, “tech enthusiasts”, or “fans of Reading Rainbow” seen in prior examples. In defining, and arguing for virtues of a medium rather than taking for granted the value of the medium as a given unto itself, Sarkeesian is hoping to draw interest not just from the gaming community, but from a wider audience of people with an interest in the construction and deconstruction of pop culture as well as those with an interest in feminist activism and analysis.

Sarkeesian, having introduced the basics about her project and the gaps it means to fill then, much like the other samples reviewed earlier, focuses on her credentials, explaining why she is the best person to handle such a project. Interestingly, although she utilizes academic methodologies in her work and is proposing an academic, critical project, she shies away from using the discourses, terminology, and definitions of traditional academic feminism:

*This video series will focus on tracking five stereotypical representations of women throughout the history of video games: I’m going to look at “The Damsel in Distress”, “The Fighting F---toy”, “The Sexy Sidekick”, “The Sexy Villainess”, and the most common trope in video games, “Women as Background Decoration.” Last year, I released a successful video series called Tropes vs. Women where I looked at the reoccurring patterns in the way that women are portrayed in the media. Some of the tropes I looked at were “The Manic Pixie Dream Girl”, “The Smurfette*
Principle”, and “Women in Refrigerators”. Those last two are extremely common in video games as well. What I try to do in my videos is give people the language to understand, and talk about, issues in gender and sexism using accessible examples from popular culture. Feminist Frequency videos have been used in middle school, high school, and university classrooms. They’ve been integrated into the curriculum of media studies, gender studies, and law school programs. Parents have even reached out to me, saying that they’ve used my videos to spark discussion with their kids about representations of women in the media.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick, in discussing crowdsourced online work, argues that “new forms of networked communication have raised questions about the relationship between expertise and credentials, suggesting that in many cases readers from outside our narrowly defined fields, and even outside the academy, may bring much-needed perspectives to our work” and, in discussing the promises and pitfalls of the digital humanities and of digital technologies in general, writes, “[n]ew work being done in and on the digital not only can but should transgress the existing borders of knowledge, as these fields wrestle with new methods, new formats and new affordances for scholarly work” and that, in the digital age, academic “peers” are being redefined as “the meritocratic notion of the peer gives way...to an understanding of a peer as any node connected to a network” (454-455). Sarkeesian is, of course, far from an un-credentialed outsider to academic discourses. She possesses a master’s degree in social and political thought from York University, and has written extensively on the subjects of gender and media studies. Her choice, then, to eschew the credentialing discourses of the academy in favor of wider, popular expertise is especially interesting. Her goal of creating an academic text using popular culture as a mode of education in the discourses of academic feminism represents a transgression of the boundaries of traditional academic institutions even as it works to enculturate non-expert members of the audience into that very same community’s dialogues. She also uses her prior work, which she shows short clips of throughout this section of the video, and its presence within academic and educational
settings to further credential herself. In a sense, this serves to both expand her audience to academics as well as non-academics by unifying them under the common goal of participating in a dialogue about women’s issues, and to expand the number of “nodes” in the network of women’s studies by inviting a broad range of peers. She is, in a sense, crowdfunding a project as a way of creating more crowdsourced work for gender studies.

Following some more clips of her previous work, the video concludes by explaining the reasoning behind Kickstarter as a platform and inviting viewers to participate by funding the project and following the author on social media:

*Each video in this new series will be between ten and twenty minutes long, with well-researched, in-depth analysis. As with all Feminist Frequency videos, these will be available online for free for anyone and everyone to watch, share, and use. In each video, I’ll also be sure to showcase some inventive and interesting games that manage to avoid these harmful tropes. As you might imagine, this project requires an enormous amount of research, because I’m not just looking at a handful of games, or just the worst offenders, but at hundreds of games and hundreds of different characters across all genres. This is an incredibly ambitious project, because of the scope and scale of the research and production involved. So please donate any amount you can to bring this video series to life. Thank you for watching this video and for supporting my work. You can follow me on Twitter at @FemFreq, and check out examples of my previous videos at FeministFrequency.com.*

This conclusion bears similarities to prior examples in that Sarkeesian details why crowdfunding can best serve to fund the project. However, unlike Schafer and Luckey’s pitches, Sarkeesian does not couch the funding in terms of an apology. Where Schafer and Luckey’s community audience is assumed to know something about the cost of producing a game or a technical artifact, and is thus offered an explanation
for the financial needs by way of technical limitations and affordances, Sarkeesian’s explanation focuses on the ambition and labor involved in the process of authoring the text. Nor is the audience invited to directly participate in the process itself. Unlike the authoring of a text, artifact, or publication whose goal is its own creation, the activism of the project, and the means of credentialing herself as an expert and teacher of a discourse, centers the importance of the project on the outcomes it can achieve rather than the authoring of the project itself. Ede and Lunsford write that, rather than merely addressing or invoking an audience, writers “may analyze these readers' needs, anticipate their biases, even defer to their wishes. But it is only through the text, through language, that writers embody or give life to their conception of the reader. In so doing, they do not so much create a role for the reader - a phrase which implies that the writer somehow creates a mold to which the reader adapts - as invoke it...writers conjure their vision-a vision which they hope readers will actively come to share as they read the text-by using all the resources of language available to them to establish a broad, and ideally coherent, range of cues for the reader” (167).

Sarkeesian, then, is embodying herself as pedagogue, her videos as the modality of education, and the audience of her pitch as either fellow teachers desiring to support her educational methodology or students looking for a means through which they, outsiders to academic discourses, may still be brought into the conversation. Alexander Reid writes that “the pedagogic event does not provide specific guidelines for behavior or method; it does not reveal how to resist control or excellence. A pedagogic event is not a teaching practice but rather the material space in which pedagogy occurs” (The Two Virtuals, 189) and that in teaching for digitally-involved students, a pedagogue might “more productively understand ideology through an examination of the materiality of thought and language” (191). In other words, the teacher of the digital classroom should, according to Reid, seek to create spaces in which the intersections of thought, language, and materiality may be examined through shared discourses. This is what Sarkeesian seeks to do in her video; to use critique of shared cultural and
technological media and modalities – video games in this case – to build a community-as-classroom for
the discussion, examination, and deconstruction of dominant ideologies. Her pitch’s audience, then, is
being offered a different kind of collaborative power than the audience of Oculus, Double Fine
Adventure, or Reading Rainbow; it’s being offered the roles of both student and academic administrator.

Conclusions

Although Sarkeesian’s project was smaller in scale than any of the other pitches I’ve discussed
throughout the chapter, it arguably has had the greatest cultural impact. This impact represents more
than just a change in the cultures of video gaming and digital media. It speaks to the possibilities for
collaboration between discourse communities – academic and non-academic alike – as well as a telling
glimpse into the shape and possibilities of crowdfunding and crowdsourcing to affect and persuade
others to participate in civic changes. We must, however, take care not to view it as a binary between
the digital and the non-digital. As I’ve argued throughout this study, “local” is not merely a matter of
geography. Rather, geography is an affordance for communication and the forming of discourse
communities, just like genre, text, and technology. Davies writes that, unlike mass, commercially driven
crowdfunding endeavors, civic crowdfunding is far more modest in scale:

*Small-scale non-profits are natural early adopters of civic crowdfunding because they are among
those best placed to benefit from, and not be overly disrupted by, the process. To these
organizations, fundraising is a hard-won, grass-roots activity focused on relatively small, locally-
focused donor outreach, and is usually performed by volunteers. Crowdfunding platforms
provide a way to make this process more efficient and offer the potential to reach a broader
audience...while the promise of transferability and scalability in civic crowdfunding is attractive,
the data show that the geography of civic crowdfunding is uneven (130-131).*
Davies later laments that “there is no intentional civic movement on Kickstarter” (132) and that the current model of crowdfunding does not offer equitable distribution of funding and opportunity. “If the growth of civic crowdfunding widens the gap between socio-economic groups, between large cities and smaller ones, and between communities, it may become another market-led activity that needs to be regulated or resisted” (135). Crowdfunding, Davies writes, does not “disintermediate” the process of activism, but merely creates new, different intermediaries to set the rules of a civic project (137). This, however, represents less of a problem with crowdfunding than it does a misunderstanding of the shape that activism can take. Davies, along with other analysts of crowdfunding as a means of earning money or creating social change, view the lack of recognizable “local” activism “within” smaller communities as a problem to solve either through regulation or other means. However, this is, to use an old cliché, not a bug, but a feature. The success and subsequent cultural force of Sarkeesian’s Kickstarter pitch shows us that the local is constructed not through geographical space but through time. The local, in other words, is tactical. To view markets as detached from the digital local, therefore, is to ignore the ways in which those without monetary capital can give or create social capital in order to create materials that speak to the creation and reification of communities and ideologies – of thought and language.

Another important takeaway from Sarkeesian’s pitch, as well as other activist pitches, lies in the way authors construct authorities in response to the needs of their communities. Where in previous subgenres, the authority of reputation is afforded based on the reception of a body of prior works by a pre-existing audience, in activism authority is defined along intersecting lines of trust in the author as pedagogue/leader and in the technical possibilities for change perceived in the affordances of the project itself. Within activism, the community is not collaborator as much as it is a supporter; more sponsor than participant. We see this, for instance, in the pitch for Marco Williams’s documentary film about the dangers facing migrants attempting to reach the border of the United States and Mexico, entitled *The Undocumented:*
I decided to make this film because I really wanted to expose this humanitarian crisis. And it is a crisis. It breaks my heart that our policy, the United States immigration policy, has resulted in nearly two thousand to three thousand deaths along this corridor. In the mid-1990s, the United States decided to fortify urban crossings. But they left a section of the Arizona desert without much of a fence. The reason that they left this part of the desert so available for people to cross is that they thought the desert would serve as a sort of natural deterrent. Unfortunately, it has been anything but that. I’ve been working on this film for nearly three years. I shot in 2009 from June to December. I did most of the shooting myself. I went to the desert, I went to the medical examiner’s office, the Mexican consulate, for the most part this film has been a labor of love.

With your help, I’ll be able to finish the film. Doing the color correction, the mix, the sound design, hiring the composer, as well as subtitling it into English and Spanish. And in return for your support, I have some wonderful things to offer to you, to help you feel part of this project.

Similarly, the photographer Will Potter pitched a project entitled Drone on the Farm. It opens as follows:

I’m an independent journalist based in Washington DC and I want to talk to you about a new project I’m really excited about. For more than 10 years my reporting has focused on how protest is being labeled as terrorism. I’ve testified before the US congress about my reporting, and was also selected as a TED fellow for 2014. But there’s a trend I’m seeing right now that, 15 years ago, I never would have thought possible. The agriculture industry is backing new legislation that would make it illegal to even photograph animal cruelty on factory farms and slaughter houses. These so-called “AG GAG” bills are a direct response to the undercover investigations of groups like the Humane Society. These whistleblowers have exposed horrific animal cruelty like workers beating turkeys with pipes and have led to the largest meat recall in US history that led to criminal charges, and the agriculture industry is fighting back. These laws are meant to keep
consumers in the dark. So the obvious question is, what is Big AG trying to hide? With your help, I’m going to find out

These two introductions share several lexical and textual similarities with Sarkeesian’s pitch: first, they emphasize the ideological importance of the overall issue that their project seeks to address. Rather than demonstrating a passion for the creative process itself, these pitches cast their work as a means towards the civic goal of solving – or at least addressing – this larger problem. Second, they hardly mention the audience – the “you” being addressed by the speakers in many of these videos – instead focusing on the work, goals, and needs of the authors and their beliefs about what the project represents. When the audience is mentioned it is not in terms of collaborative participant in the project, but instead as a sponsor who has the power to help the authors conduct their work, albeit on their terms. Taken together, therefore, these videos show us not how activism works or does not work when imported to the platform of crowdfunding, as Davies and others suggest. Rather, they demonstrate how communities can be created and shaped through the creation of texts, and, in the case of these activist projects, rallied towards the furthering of a cause under the authority of a talented expert in the discourses of the movement itself and in the use of new technologies to tactically solve the civic problems facing them.

The Genres of Generosity: Conclusion

Crowdfunding is not entirely new. It bears similarities to the prior modalities of both advertising and grant requests, drawing on stylistic choices that are both promises and requests. In one study by Haiying Feng of City University of Hong Kong, we see, in the examined grant proposal abstracts, a breakdown of the linguistic features particular to each move in the genre. Feng found that “the sub-genre of research grant proposal abstracts, like most academic texts, is informational, non-narrative, and non-situated... Its predominant use of present and future tenses reflects its particular
communicative needs of facing forward instead of looking back” (16). This, according to Feng, allows the author to establish a niche for his or her project which by “reporting weaknesses of previous research as a natural part of knowledge development, the writers head off possible objections and facilitate solidarity with the reader” (19). Grants, according to this study need to establish a sense of community with their readers while also demonstrating how a project will fill a gap in the community that both author and reader must agree exists. Crowdfunding proposals share these features, since the open call of the pitch video must not only appeal to future innovations in a specific field, but must also foster a community of interested supporters to both invest money and spread the word across social networks.

On the other side of the coin are advertisements, which, unlike grants, seek to generate enthusiasm within a mass audience for an existing product or service. In his book *The Discourse of Advertising*, Guy Cook attempts to classify advertising as a kind of discourse unto itself. He argues that an ad’s sender must “predict both what the addressee does and does not know, and what he or she wants to know” (176) and that “What an ad seeks to achieve is enough contact between fiction and reality, sender and receiver, characters and consumer, fantasy and fact, for the passage of the product from one world to another to be feasible” (180-181). Advertising is both predictive and persuasive. Similarly, crowdfunding proposals ask their audiences to imagine a “fantasy world” where the product or service proposed has been successfully funded, and invites them to contribute directly to bring the product from one “world” to another.

However, neither category of analysis adequately predicts the moves and linguistic characteristics particular to crowdfunding pitches. Unlike advertisements, crowdfunding pitches are not typically created for the purpose of generating interest in an existing product; rather, the typical pitch seeks to, like a grant, secure funding for a project that has not yet been developed. Where ads, according to Cook “are a discourse on the periphery of attention” and “are unsolicited by their receivers” (221) crowdfunded projects typically reach out to smaller communities of interested
consumers looking to participate in a specific community. Therefore, we see how the remediation of
two genres into the affordances of the digital landscape reveals the traces of prior persuasive acts.
However, we also see how analyzing crowdfunding from the perspective of advertising (where an
existing product is the persuasive artifact) and grants (where the audience is extrinsically motivated to
grant or deny funding and is in a fixed position of authority over the author’s work) is limiting in that
such an analysis cannot speak to the unique intersection of hope and consumerism that drives
successful crowdfunding campaigns. It cannot speak to the collaborative nature of crowdfunding, nor
can prior genres speak to the continuous, ongoing, and rhetorically charged collaborative nature of a
crowdfunding campaign. In advertising and grant writing, one group holds fixed power over another. In
crowdfunding, the negotiation of shifting power dynamics is as much a part of the speech act as the
words of the pitch themselves.

Overall, we see a number of key similarities emerge throughout the analysis of these texts and
their associated subgenres. These similarities are, however, made all the more apparent by the
important differences as texts attempting to reach different communities are observed. In each of these
prototypical texts we see a number of lexical and social moves that, although varied in their details,
speak to a consistent discursive structure unique to this genre. We may classify these as “moves” in a
manner similar to Connor and Muranen, but the vast array of subgenres within crowdfunding –
potentially far more numerous than the relatively neat categories of this study – lead to discrepancies,
inconsistencies, anomalies, and affordances that make such quantitative analysis difficult to pin down.
There is, as we will see in chapter four of this study, no “winning formula” for crowdfunding, no “best
practices” that guarantee funding. The variables of modality, reputation, changes in reputation, humor,
and other discursive complications affect the genre in ways so numerous as to make reliable prediction
and analysis nearly impossible. This does not mean, however, that genre classification is meaningless;
we may examine the assumptions that unify the moves typical to the genre, and trace, in the cases
where these moves are different or absent, how expert participants of the wider meta-community of crowdfunding play with and transgress these assumptions in rhetorically effective ways. In other words, although not universal, examining the typical traits of successful crowdfunding pitches gives us a useful foundation for future analysis of both the texts of the genre and the communities that formulate, interact, and communicate around these texts.

Throughout the four prototypical texts examined in this chapter, we may isolate several commonalities in the language used by the authors of these pitches:

- Future-tense language when referring to the project being pitched.
- Past-tense language when speaking of their credentials (such as prior works), and, more importantly, the values to which the work that earned authors their credentials aspired.
- Informal use of personal pronouns. When referring to him or herself, the speakers often use the first-person singular “I”, even if working as a part of a larger team. When referring to the audience, the speaker uses the second person singular “you”.
- Specialized Terminology or Technical Jargon, especially when speaking of the project’s design or the labor in its creation.
- Confident language when speaking of the project, indicated through frequent use of linguistic “emphasizers” such as “very”, “extremely”, “many”, “really”, etc.
- Subservient language when speaking of costs or labor needs, indicated through increased usage of “hedgers” such as “I think”, “I try”, “If you decide...” etc.
- Use of modal verbs such as “can”, “will”, and “when”.

We also see several structural consistencies and rhetorical tropes in many of the texts:
• Appeals to the importance of the community and the author’s place as an insider, often through the demonstration of familiarity with texts valued by the community

• Arguments for the importance or value of the “type” of work being done (Adventure Games, Feminist Activism, Virtual Reality, etc.)

• Arguments for the existence of a gap within that community and the need for it to be filled

• Credentialing references in support of the author’s passion claims, often in the form of interviews with others within the community or samples of prior work

• Explanations regarding the funding, including why Kickstarter is needed and how the money will be used

• Calls to action addressed to the audience, often in the form of donating, spreading interest over social media, or both.

• Frequent references to change, empowerment, or disruption throughout the videos

These lexical, grammatical, rhetorical, and structural commonalities will be further explored in chapter 4. However, we see, through the in-depth analysis of our prototypical texts, the recurrence of these characteristics throughout the most influential, lucrative, or socially important examples of the genre. Taken together, a pattern emerges which speaks to the ways in which the audience, community, author, and project are all viewed throughout crowdfunding.

There is, throughout, a vein of optimism and futurism regarding the projects; the references to change, the surety that a project “will” be released, and that “when” it does it will create important cultural changes within a community, and the arguments for a gap in the community as well as the power of the project to fix or fill this gap, all speak to a feeling of progressive positivism throughout the genre. This is also seen in the frequent allusions to new possibilities presented by the digital medium itself; Schafer, for instance, spoke of Kickstarter’s ability to bring dedicated audiences to a project to act
as a substitute for publishers as something new to and uniquely allowed by the internet, and Sarkeesian and Burton’s calls for the freely published and social accessibility of their work is a direct reference to the values of transparency and democratizing accessibility as ideals of the growing platform of digital media. Innovation, however, is not a virtue that the authors will necessarily claim for themselves. The appeals to prior works (or the prior works of credentialing interviewees such as John Carmack in the case of the Oculus), nostalgia, or ideologies once valued by the community but now reduced to an under-represented niche situate the authors too deeply in the past. Instead, the promise of innovative work is shown to be the purview of the audience. This is most apparent in the claims of vulnerability present in many crowdfunding pitches, where the speakers argue that a project “needs” the funding, labor, and support of audience-as-collaborator to succeed. We also see it in the explanations for why Kickstarter is being used in the first place, and in how and why the money will be channeled towards specific aspects of the project. It is, however, most apparent in the ways that the authors address their communities; not as consumers, but as peers, colleagues, supporters, or collaborators, all working towards a future that will, the pitches promise, use the creation of a text to shape according to a shared sense of values between content creator and working consumer.

This is the true appeal of Kickstarter for many; the ability to formulate as a community to authorize and empower the creative vision of a trusted insider to change the values of their discourse communities back to a lost or under-represented ideological shape. It is, to borrow the terminology of Kenneth Burke, about the granting of agency towards the creation of a new rhetorical situation – the construction of a new digital local. Burke writes that “our interpretation of an act is a function of the scene in which we think of it as enacted...any such philosophical circumference is rhetorically persuasive insofar as it ultimately implies what corresponding attitudes would be reasonable and what modes of conduct would be possible” (“Rhetoric, Poetics, and Philosophy”, 23). Throughout the prototypical texts discussed in this chapter, we see the construction of, and interaction between, different “scenes” of
persuasion, and the actions and reactions of participants who view the speech acts of Kickstarter through the terministic screens of their communities. There is also, as Burke argues, a constant shifting of these scenes as the rhetorical situation changes shape, existing as a solid – if evolving – “place” for interlocutors to drop in and out, for authors to establish and barter authority with their audience, and for the various technologies of persuasion to facilitate ever-changing modes of persuasion. It is this process of exchange of value that allows these communities to interact, and, in online places like Kickstarter, the persuasive technologies of money, social media, and even authorship itself are what create the affordances necessary for members of different, disparate communities to interact, persuade one another, and generate texts that will both shape existing communities and create new ones.

In such rhetorical situations, time, money, creativity and expertise take on different symbolic meaning, and thus allow for different kinds of interaction, than they might in other “places” of persuasion. If, for instance, the audience of a pitch is persuaded to trust the author, they “vote” for him or her through the investment of social or economic capital; in the case of Kickstarter, this is done through “backing” a project. This is not, unlike in the transactional exchanges of a market-driven community, the end of the process. The crowdfunded author is, once invested with this authority, required to continually prove the validity of his or her claims to the role through the transparency of their process. Schafer kept regular video updates of his game’s development and participated in ongoing feedback with the community, Sarkeesian releases her work episodically and regularly interacts with, collaborates with, and even argues against many other non-academic participants from her audience, and Burton’s continual release of free content is more than just the delivery of a product; it is an ongoing persuasive act, showing through the publication of texts his devotion to the values of his backers. In other words, they must return a portion of the power ceded to them by their audiences investment, either to encourage future participation, raise and cultivate the social capital needed for future projects, or motivate ongoing symbolic-analytic labor from the crowd to help in the distribution
or enhancement of their texts even after the initial project’s conclusion. In observing the ways in which
this exchange of authority recurs back and forth between author and audience on Kickstarter, we can, in
turn, trace the building (or destruction) of authority through the long-term acquisition of greater and
greater social capital; a successful Kickstarter which produces a well-received product will earn goodwill
for the author’s future projects. It also further legitimates Kickstarter as a whole.

We may also, in observing the different genre characteristics of Kickstarter, see how rhetorical
moves, tropes, and language gradually change to suit the needs of different, loosely interconnected
communities. It is the transparency of these connections which makes Kickstarter extremely valuable for
the understanding of rhetoric across the digital local. It also, however, shows the unexpected ways that
such communities can, once formed through online places, exert pressures and influences beyond the
initial scope of a project or text. Take, for example, the controversies surrounding some of the
prototypical texts discussed in this chapter. Although this paper is not intended to examine or speak to
the roots and effects of online controversies and harassment, the differing levels of discontinuity
surrounding these texts represent a telling image of how the terministic screens of the digital local
should be carefully considered for their potential to induce both identification and division –
cooperation and dissonance – or even potentially violent or hateful rhetoric even without the
intentional incitement to such extremes. On one end of this spectrum we have the previously discussed
pushback against the Oculus Rift and its creators following the buyout by Facebook.

It is not a desire for extrinsic compensation – money, credit, etc. – that drove the controversy.
Rather, it was the sudden seeming shift in values coupled with the project’s own success at arguing for
its influence and importance to the community of tech-enthusiasts who made it possible. Columbo et al.
writes that “In crowdfunding platforms, the amount of capital collected by a project and the number of
people who have already backed it are usually highly visible...these statistics invite conjectures about the
unknown) quality of the project. A sizable amount of early capital and numerous early backers are hints that many have already scrutinized the project, liked it, and trusted its proponents and their ability to successfully complete the project” (4). This is, in some ways, reminiscent of Lyotard’s examination of how the industrial revolution affected the process of valuation:

What happened at the end of the eighteenth century, with the first industrial revolution, is that the reciprocal of this equation was discovered: no technology without wealth, but no wealth without technology. A technical apparatus requires an investment; but since it optimizes the efficiency of the task to which it is applied, it also optimizes the surplus-value derived from this improved performance. All that is needed is for the surplus-value to be realized, in other words, for the product of the task performed to be sold (The Postmodern Condition, 45).

Money, when viewed through the transparency of the internet as an indication of value for a project, renders it (or more accurately the investment of it) becomes a tool of persuasion. This, again, reflects how rhetorical velocity applies not only to the technology of Kickstarter itself, but how it alters other technologies of persuasion brought to use along the unique affordances of the medium. Ridolfo and DeVoss write:

Rhetorical velocity is the strategic theorizing for how a text might be recomposed (and why it might be recomposed) by third parties, and how this recomposing may be useful or not to the short- or long-term rhetorical objectives of the rhetorician...Thinking with rhetorical velocity in mind requires one to have an idea about the working conditions of the third party and what type of text it would be useful (or not) to provide: What document format should a file be sent in for certain types of future remixing? What resolution should images be released in if they are to be reprinted in a print publication? What level of quality and format should video be released in if it were to be cut up into additional tapes? What segments of these texts may be useful, and to
whom, and for what sorts of media production? In each of these strategic questions rhetorical velocity requires on the part of rhetors a careful consideration of the future time (and particular moments) and place(s) of where, how, and potentially into what texts may be recomposed—and what this may mean.

As Kickstarter itself states, projects created through crowdfunding are designed with interaction between author and audience – creator and backer – in mind. As I have argued, however, this interaction is not only done through the text of web forums or the multimodality of pitch videos. Every update from the author, every response from audiences, every favorable endorsement on social media or scathing remix parodying a failure, every modification throughout the development of a project, and every backer who chooses to invest – or not invest – their time and money in a project is a part of crowdfunding’s rhetorical velocity. Just as a surge of backers in the first days of a project persuades others to come and lend support throughout its lifespan, so too does the withholding or withdrawal of funds serve as a persuasive act expressing a community’s desire for changes to a text as it is being authored, the money itself serving both as a symbol of the exchange of a market-based final product to consumers and as a technology through which the approval or displeasure of the community supporting the product’s development can be expressed. And, as Ridolfo and DeVoss show, these are all affordances which must be carefully considered by authors, even as their texts reach out from the smaller discourse communities into the wider world of the Digital Local.

Although the symbolic-analytic work of the crowdfunding pitch takes place in a post-industrial information economy, there are, as with all remediations, traces of the older technology of persuasion (in this case economics) within the new. In short, money can (and often does) represent a measure of legitimation, which in turn represents a measure of importance, value, and rhetorical influence. Luckey’s goal in his pitch was not just to show his audience that he’s made a technical apparatus that will work,
but that it will work on a mass scale and exert cultural influence that will favor the values of the backers. When Facebook acquired the rights to the Rift, and through it the rights to dictate the rhetorical situations its affordances create. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant; his audience was persuaded of this to the extent that they were willing to support its development under the tacit assumption that, as backers, the resulting technical artifact would be designed to meet their needs and ideals. The controversy over Facebook’s purchase, and subsequent controversies over the artifact’s market price, return again and again to the apparent betrayal of the project’s initial vision, so much so that Luckey spoke to it directly in a Reddit “AMA” thread:

*I still want to make VR cheap, functional, and disruptive, but it takes a certain amount of quality to do that...Three years ago, I thought a good enough headset could be built for $300 and run on a decent gaming PC. Since then, we have learned a lot about what it takes to induce presence, and the landscape of the industry has changed a lot too--we are no longer the only players, and the burden of bringing good VR to everyone is no longer solely on us...The best way to make a technology mainstream is not always as simple as making a cheap product as quickly as possible, that is what lead to the last VR crash...Tesla is a good example--Elon Musk had to convince the public that electric cars could be awesome before he could build the technology that would actually make electric cars mainstream. If Tesla had tried to make a $35k mass-market electric car back in 2008, they would have accomplished little. Instead, they made the Roadster and Model S, proved that electric cars could be awesome, invested heavily in R&D, and now have a clear path towards their ever-present long term goal: making electric cars mainstream.*

The content of Luckey’s explanation and apology, in contrast to the promises of his pitch, is couched in the language of tactical navigation; his earlier idealism is offset in this argument against a “ends
justifying the means” approach to, what he argues, is the community’s eventual shared goal of ubiquitous, disruptive technology.

Such an argument, which, like the initial pitch, casts the Rift (more as a symbol of innovation than as a singular product) as a tactical, commons-based artifact designed to create opportunities for future change and development of the digital technology community, is directly contradicted by the buyout itself, however. Even if the audience’s hopes for the Rift as a medium for, or the nexus of, a “place” wherein creative, commons-based work could occur were merely naïve assumptions made about the possibilities of what was, ultimately, just another product for purchase on the market, that hope was still central to the persuasive efficacy of Luckey’s initial pitch. However, when Facebook purchased the rights to the rift, they not only acquired control over its production and imposed the values and genre moves of their own community onto the Rift’s backers, they also imposed upon the Rift a single, strategic narrative, reducing it in the eyes of many backers to a mere technical object rather than as a rallying point for their community. As of now the controversy persists, with Luckey hemorrhaging social capital with each new announcement. Whether this jump in price, from $300 to $600 per unit, would have been forgiven by the community had Luckey not sold the Rift to Facebook is unclear, but the ongoing pushback against the former community representative shows how the resources of time, attention, and communal goodwill can be finite if not properly cultivated – or if sold to a higher bidder.

On the other hand, if the controversy surrounding the Rift represents a community’s use of tactics against one who supposedly betrayed its values, the harassment of Anita Sarkeesian following the release of *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* shows the darker side of the sometimes knee-jerk defensiveness communities can take against perceived intrusions from supposed outsiders. The problems and harm caused by online harassment, bigotry, stalking, and other, similarly criminal acts
directed at Sarkeesian and other cultural critics online – as well as the toxic cultural and ideological values which may have led to such problems - are subjects deserving of their own, far more extensive studies than what this paper is able to provide. Even so, the intensity, and momentum of such terrible responses to a critical, academic project is worth noting as a kind of dangerous side effect of online persuasion; when identification is created, division, as Burke argues, must also occur. Moreover, the seemingly arbitrary nature of what “the crowd” will invest in can leave many worthwhile causes, projects, or communities left in the cold, unfunded, and scratching their heads in frustration, wondering how a potato salad can receive more funding than aids activism. The dangers and consequences of crowdfunding – and the digital local as a whole – are as compelling and important to address as its promise and potential. Money is a powerful technology of persuasion, after all, and its use is fraught with other implications and reactions, putting many at risk of being marginalized, forgotten, or attacked. Understanding how and why communities formulate a sense of identification or division through these rhetorics of valuation may, hopefully, go a long way towards curtailing destructive community responses in favor of the productive, the positive, and the tactical.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Potato Salad Incident

In July of 2014, Zack “Danger” Brown, started a Kickstarter campaign asking for $10 to make a potato salad. The page’s front text, for most a several-paragraphs long description of a project, the team, the goals and methodologies and so on, read simply “Basically I’m just making potato salad. I haven’t decided what kind yet.” The rewards, which were offered for donations of $1 all the way up to $110, all included the promise that Brown would say the name of the backer aloud while making the potato salad. The campaign, as of its closing date August 2nd, 2014, had been sponsored by nearly 7000 backers, earning over $55,000. An update from Kickstarter the next day discussed the project, saying “It wasn’t the project’s ambitions that blew us away, because... well, it wasn’t very ambitious, at least at first. It was the reaction Zack got from all corners of the Internet: head-scratching, laughter, loud harrumphing, pure delight. And it was Zack’s graceful handling of a project that quickly became far too big to fit in a bowl.” They went on in the post to show the statistics behind the project: not only was it the fourth-most viewed Kickstarter project on the entire site, it boasted backers from 74 countries across the globe and received coverage in over 2000 media mentions, including on the New Yorker and Good Morning America. Several of the backers of the Potato Salad had also backed projects like Reading Rainbow and Double Fine Adventure, and, as the blog post showed, most were old hands at backing projects:

Most of the project’s backers were not new to Kickstarter: 72% were repeat backers. In fact, even when you include the newcomers, potato salad backers have backed an average of 15 projects on Kickstarter! So while this was a global joke on the Internet, backing the project became an inside joke among core Kickstarter fans...Zack’s project inspired some handwringing about What It All Means. Here’s one take: Kickstarter is a good place to aim high and go big, but small
projects are great too. If you want to make something to share with others, maybe you just need ten or 20 or 50 people to get your idea off the ground. And if it turns out that 6,911 people share your vision for potato salad... then you’re going to need some more potatoes.

Another take of course, is that Brown’s project succeeded on its merits as an inside joke. The source of its humor – and its subsequent financial success, lay in both the low-stakes nature of investment in Brown’s project (there were people who backed it to the full amount of $110, but most gave little over a dollar), and more importantly, the familiarity with Kickstarter pitches as a genre that proved Brown as an insider to the larger meta-genre of Crowdfunding as a whole. Brown was able to use the discourses, language, and rhetorical moves valued by the larger community of crowdfunding, as evidenced by the large number of repeat backers, to establish himself as an authority, not of potato salad, but of Kickstarter. While there was no initial pitch video, an update following the Kickstarter’s premier, set against short video clips of a man walking through a lush Ohio hiking trail, discussed the salad with a kind of reverent breathlessness often reserved for the inside of Churches:

We face a paradox when we design; to make the cutting edge familiar, and the familiar cutting edge, and vice-versa. But if we can overcome these challenges, we can make a product without compromise. When we set out to make a potato salad we couldn’t say yes to every ingredient. And there are a thousand “noes” for every “yes.” Every ingredient had to have a reason to be there. And we had to ask ourselves “what’s important here?” Consistency. Taste. Texture. We set out to redefine what a side dish could be. And together, we’re building a movement.

The video concludes with someone off camera asking Brown “will it change the world?” To which Brown, after pausing and staring thoughtfully off into the middle distance, nods and responds “probably.” Examining this text shows an expertise in the lexical and rhetorical moves of Crowdfunding which would be instantly recognizable to veterans of the genre. Brown’s tone is hopeful, progressive,
and future-focused. He speaks directly to the constant balancing between the new and the familiar inherent to most crowdfunding visions. His methodology, although deliberately vague and obtuse, enacts the performance of expertise needed for credibility in designing a new kind of product. Even the conclusion of the minute-long video is consistent with most crowdfunding pitches in that it calls on the audience to be a part of the movement which will “probably” change the world in ways that are never quite articulated. In effect, Brown designed the ultimate prototypical text of the Kickstarter Pitch genre, and the reactions from outside of the in-group of backers – ranging from amusement to puzzlement to, as we saw with Bytsura’s article about Potato Salad versus AIDS activism, outrage – only bolstered the parody’s efficacy.

This chapter will add to the multitude of handwringing about “What It All Means” by examining both a wildly successful potato salad, a high-profile Kickstarter failure, and a collection of assembled data about what practices can drive people to give (and the ways in which these practices can be powerfully influenced by technical, contextual, and rhetorical affordances) to show that in Crowdfunding, the Digital Local, and possibly in all rhetorical situations, the persuasive efficacy of a speech act is decided more by the discursive and genre awareness shown by the speaker than by the project itself. I will also argue that in examining this demonstration of discursive competence through language, rhetoric, and communal familiarity, scholars of the humanities, teachers of writing, and cultural critics may find a different way to approach the analysis of technology, rhetoric, and the function of authors within communities. In order to do so, we will first examine a body qualitative data assembled by previous studies about the ways in which crowdfunding is influenced by language, persuasive moves, funding goals, endorsements from celebrities and veteran backers, and other traits like geography, wealth, class, etc. This body of information is not meant to provide an objective insight into the “how to” of crowdfunding, nor is it meant to encapsulate all of the relevant studies about crowdfunding as a whole, of which there are a steadily increasing number. Instead, this data will provide
support for the arguments about crowdfunding as a genre which I have presented in chapter three. Further, it will serve as a tool in order to establish the context in which the paper’s overall argument – that the study of the Digital Local and of the roles of authors and the communities to which they belong are best viewed in terms of identification and the performance of belonging – through the prototypical texts and genre categories shown throughout this study. Finally, the numbers will provide a platform for analysis of the meta-genre of crowdfunding, showing the stakes, levels of participation, and potential influences on culture both on and offline.

By analyzing and re-interpreting the results of several other studies, a major goal for this chapter is to provide an alternative framework through which humanities scholars – both within and outside of the academy – can enact their own examinations of digital discourses and discourse communities without needing to approach these new mediums from the perspective of best practices or needing to set any hard borders on what digital media and communities represent when compared to older modalities. As I’ve previously argued, it is important to approach the study of crowdfunding – indeed of any new technology, digital or otherwise – with a mind for the persuasive, cultural, ideological, and political affordances that it both creates and is created by. The values of the humanities (itself an increasingly digital local community) uniquely allow scholars within such fields to move beyond the outcomes-driven myopia shown in many of the studies of crowdfunding cited in previous chapters.

In “This is Why We Fight” Lisa Spiro writes that “The values of the humanities provide the foundation for the digital humanities...such as critical dialogue and free inquiry with an ethic focused on the democratic sharing of ideas...the digital humanities reconfigures the humanities for the Internet age, leveraging networked technologies to exchange ideas, create communities of practice, and build knowledge” (19-21). Similarly, in “The Digital Humanities Which is Not One” Bianco writes:
Digital and computational work simultaneously documents, establishes, and affectively produces an iteration of real worlds...worlds both felt and real but multimodally layered worlds...in the creation of context, relationality, and interactivity, the lived collaboration of the “user” (and in the classroom, the student”) becomes a performance, a necessary flow and return of participatory and synaesthetic rhetorics. If the critical impulse is to become inventive, creational, and social, and with it critical and cultural studies, then the entire constellation of context, affect, and embodiment must remain viably dynamic and collaborative in digital and computational work...digital modes offer a huge range of potential critical and cultural affordances, and the key to this potential lies in their public and accessible capacities for phenomenological transfer as affective, lived, and located experience (108).

Crowdsourced work, then, is inextricably linked to the values of the Digital Humanities (and by extension, the Humanities as a whole), and, as I have argued throughout this study, the providing of funds is itself a kind of symbolic-analytic work, especially when performed tactically in order to support, represent, or permit an author to work outside of the affordances and confines of earlier publishing models.

It is important, therefore, to study how the crowd works, what drives it to work in the first place, and the ways in which a community decides on which methodologies of labor will best serve the creation, publication, and dissemination of the fruits of its labor. By doing so through the “text” of crowdsourcing as a genre unto itself, the humanities may then build a greater understanding the Digital, Local, and Digital Local. In other words, by examining samples of quantitative, practices-oriented study of crowdfunding through the eyes of the humanities, this chapter demonstrates a methodology for the humanistic study of a genre of persuasion all-too-dominated by market ideologies. It also enacts the study of technology, rhetoric, authorship and meaning-making within the Digital Local by, to borrow
Reid’s terminology, “ripping, burning, and mixing” existing data with an eye towards the sociocultural and rhetorical.

This chapter will also examine the ways in which parody, success, authority, and failure show the fluid, transactional nature of authorship. I will also review the dangers of assuming that the affordances and cultural standards of one modality or genre apply to another, even similarly technical modality of persuasion. In doing so, we will see how mistaking the authority granted through one medium as perfectly transferrable to another can undermine the credibility, authority, and community-identification of authors who, in previous “versions” of that community’s textual publication, were able to amass a great deal of the social capital needed to use crowdfunding effectively. In short, I will be looking at a Kickstarter pitches which, according to the criteria reviewed in chapter three and shown by the data in this chapter, should have by all rights succeeded. As mentioned previously, most Kickstarters fail to raise enough money; there is, thus, little insight to be gained in examining a large body of failures, as each failure is unique in its lack of rhetorical force. However, by examining anomalous samples of the genre, such as the Potato Salad, which succeeded when it shouldn’t have, alongside projects like *Mighty Number Nine, Red Ash*, and others which failed even when they should have succeeded, we can see how persuasion online is an ongoing, multimodal process, where the audience’s participation is determined by more than just its interest in a project or product or author, but by the author’s ability to show, and to keep showing, his or her capability for the creation of – and reverence for – the text-defining values of the community and its preferred avenues of publication. These will be the exceptions which prove the rule, in other words.

This will all, I hope, provide humanists with a useful framework for the study of crowdfunding and digital media; one which accounts for the cultural and rhetorical influences of familiar texts, genres, and modalities of discourse while, at the same time, respecting the persuasive influence of technologies
and their affordances onto the texts and the communities shaped by them. As Bianco says, the Digital Humanities is a hybrid discourse, and crowdfunding, like all technologies of persuasion, is itself a hybrid of the old and the new. In short, this chapter is a semi-open-call to the crowd to talk about crowdfunding.

**Community by the Numbers**

Crowdfunding has become the subject of increasing interest in various fields of study and business, especially within the United States. On the whole, as previously discussed, however, much of the research into the phenomenon has been focused on potentials and practices of use, either in the contexts of making money or using the money raised through crowdfunding towards more noble, activist goals. Although certainly useful knowledge, these approaches are far too rigid and limited in scope to enable a fully nuanced study of crowdfunding and its relationship to the internet and to modern political economies. Moreover, such utilitarian, “extreme usability” oriented perspectives limit the study of a new discursive modality to the affordances, standards, and practices of previous media. While, as with all remediations, there are important similarities between the new medium of Crowdfunding and older media for raising money or enacting symbolic-analytic labor, there are – as we will see later in this chapter – important new affordances which impact the rhetorical situations occurring within.

That said, we cannot dismiss or ignore the potential for knowledge found in the data and metrics of crowdfunding studies. Not only do these numbers provide a valuable insight into the stakes and techniques of the genre as a whole, they also afford humanists with new opportunities of analysis and study as we may lend alternative interpretations based on the values held by the discipline. Lev Manovich writes that “The rise of social media, along with new computational tools that can process massive amounts of data, makes possible a fundamentally new approach to the study of human beings
and society...detailed knowledge and insights that before could only be reached about a few people can now be reached about many more” (463) and that “we can use computers to quickly explore massive visual data sets and then select the objects for closer manual analysis. While computer-assisted examination of massive cultural data sets typically reveals new patterns in this data that even the best manual ‘close reading’ would miss...a human is still needed to make sense of these patterns” (468). In other words, “big data” is a technology of persuasion which both demands and enhances humanistic understanding of the rhetorical situations it creates, affords, and responds to.

In crowdfunding, then, there is much to be learned through the analysis of an increasingly vast sea of digitally collected data concerning linguistics, social impacts, the spending of money and other market data, and so on. This section analyzes and reviews only a small fragment of that information, drawing on studies, some of which are still under review, that, although they do not speak to the whole – or even the majority – of crowdfunding metrics, nevertheless reveal several key characteristics in the speech patterns, authority, and rhetorical tropes of crowdfunding. In order to best gather and interpret information from several disparate sources, I will further divide this section into two subsections: the **language patterns of crowdfunding**, and the **affordances** which enable, limit, or impact crowdfunding. As with the previous chapter’s study of genre and subgenre within Kickstarter, this list is not comprehensive; rather, it is used to reveal patterns which reoccur throughout many of the subgenres discussed previously as well as Kickstarter as a whole. It is, in effect, the study of what unifies the different communities described into a larger whole; it is the study of the geography of this particular Digital Local.
Language Patterns

I’ve shown in chapter three that there are, among successful Kickstarter projects, several lexical and grammatical commonalities that persist across the different subgenres that occur across the site. Generally speaking, the language of crowdfunding tends to be futuristic, informal, collaborative. There are, additionally, several tactical uses of tone regarding the project; when speaking of the project’s potential for success or influence, pitches tend to be confident, making use of emphasizers. When speaking of the project’s need for funding, or of the labor or affordances of publishing or designing the actual project, however, the language shifts to emphasize vulnerability, using hedgers. Consider the following examples, taken from various successful Kickstarter projects from different subgenres on the site (emphasis mine):

- What makes Ouya different…is you are able to build things right from the start. You don’t have to pay outrageous amounts of money for a dev kit. You don’t have to have a lot of credentials, just good ideas (Ouya).
- I can tell you that one thing I’m looking forward to in Kickstarter is the opportunity to make an "M" rated game. I think many publishers steer clear of that these days, and I think there’s a lot of themes that we can explore (Project Eternity).
- To create the Shadowrun RPG for tablets and PCs is going to cost a vast sum of money, so we’ve gotta ask you to dig deep, give generously...help us make this game so that all of us can start telling stories in the world of Shadowrun (Shadowrun Returns).
- And now I need your help to publish a book-length translation using the same principles. It turns out Rene Descartes was kind of an asshole, and not a great writer, but “Meditations of First Philosophy” is one of the founding works of modern philosophy. There’s no getting around it. Now, I’ve read it, and translated it paragraph by paragraph, so you don’t have to. And we’re
putting it right next to an English translation **so you can** even take it to class (Descartes’ Meditations Bro).

- **[H]elp us** hold government and industry to account on the national stage. Back the National Observer with a contribution **so we can afford** to put our award-winning team of journalists to work. **With your support, we can** travel to where these stories are breaking and **bring them back to you** (National Observer).

In these examples, we see a recurring use of language that connotes mutual interest between author and audience, collaborative efforts towards accomplishing a shared goal, and, most importantly, an emphasis on mutual service and generosity, where the authors promise to solve a problem or fill a gap as their contribution, enabled by the financial generosity of their audience. This frames the act of donating as contributing to the cause or field valued by the community to whom the pitch is addressed. Audience and author are cast as friendly peers, both working through their own means towards a common goal. The author’s ability to leverage his or her talent towards this goal, however, is implied to be contingent on the generosity of the viewer. That said, however, when the funding is accomplished, the language implies that the project’s success and influence is all but inevitable.

An in-depth, data-driven analysis of these lexical moves can be found in the study entitled “The Language that Gets People to Give” by Mitra and Gilbert. This study assembles a corpus-based linguistic analysis, drawing from 45K different Kickstarter projects, from which they “closely study 20K phrases filtered from a corpus of 9M...to see how they affect success on Kickstarter” (1). They further summarize their methodology as follows:

> For each project, we scrape its textual content from its Kickstarter homepage. This includes scraping both the project’s textual description and the promised rewards published by the project creator. We used Beautiful Soup for scraping. It is a widely used Python library for
scraping web content and allowed us to only select the text on the page related to pitches. Next, we convert all text to lowercase and tokenize text to every possible unigram, bigram and trigram, following the conventional bag of words model. Thereafter, we remove all phrases solely comprised of stop words. Finally, we end up with a corpus of 9,071,569 unique phrases (3).

After reducing their body of phrases to exclude anything that occurs less than 50 times, and further eliminating words or phrases that are specific to a particular category of Kickstarters – such as “Menu” or “Game Credits” – they were able to see several predictive patterns emerge, finding that “among 59 control variables and 20,391 phrases, the top 100 predictors of funded and not funded are solely comprised of phrases...29 of the 59 control variables had non-zero, non-random predictive power” (6). They were able to then compartmentalize these phrases based on their rhetorical, persuasive effects and on what they imply or convey about the projects, authors, or crowdfunding itself. These categories were “Reciprocity”, “Scarcity”, “Social Proof”, “Social Identity”, “Liking”, and “Authority”. Their findings showed, among other things, that “phrases which exude negativism (not been able), or lack assurance (later I, hope to get) are predictors of not funded” and that “phrases which signal lucrative offers to potential backers (also receive two, mention your) are positive predictors of successful funding...In more formal terms, these positive predictors reflect the principle of reciprocity [10] from the persuasion literature.” (9-10). They also found that “Phrases like and encouragement (‘Liking’), given the chance (‘Scarcity’), as people (‘Social Proof’) make a reappearance. Additionally, pitching a completely new form of expression is associated with not funded projects, while drawing inspiration from something that exists seems to work better” and that “forward-looking phrases (next step is, in the upcoming, will be published, to announce), phrases indicative of ongoing project work (and published, are preparing, working on a, worked in, teamed up with), phrases exhibiting ‘Authority’ (with a professional) and phrases with positive sentiment (wow, good for) are predictors of funded” (11).
Although framed almost entirely from the perspective of funding practices, the information assembled by Mitra and Gilbert provides us with valuable insight into the persuasive force of tactical word-choice in crowdfunding. More importantly, it demonstrates the ideological values of the meta-genre itself; positivity, encouragement, trust, and the authority to effectively use that trust. Of special note is the emphasis on reciprocity, although not in the relatively limited way in which Mitra and Gilbert frame it. Where they discuss reciprocity in terms of immediate rewards for donations, we can, by examining their conclusions alongside the ideological values of the communities to which these pitches appeal, see that the true value of “reciprocity” is found in the promises a text, publication, or technology makes to shape the community itself. In a sense, the ability to deliver the product – and the swag that goes with a generous donation – is just a token representation of the true value, little more meaningful to backers than Brown saying their name as he makes his potato salad. It is what the token symbolizes that truly matters; the symbolic-analytic labor performed by donating generously to help shape one’s community. We can draw a few important conclusions from this emphasis on reciprocity; first, that the authority of a crowdfunding pitch is contingent upon continuous acceptance from a large and growing body of extrinsically motivated members of the audience. Second, we can see that trust, shown on Kickstarter as the investment of monetary capital for the creation of a project, must then be maintained throughout the process of development through several ongoing rhetorical gestures. These often take the form of “backer rewards”, but rewards alone are not enough; authors must, in order to retain the trust needed for the ongoing symbolic-analytic labor of their backers, continually demonstrate gratitude for their audience’s participation through regular updates on their progress, participation in community discussion, continuous use of this informal, peer-oriented language, and, ultimately, the delivery on the promises made in the pitch in the form of a completed project. Failure to husband this trust, or post-donation behavior that contradicts this spirit of mutual generosity can, as we will see later in this chapter, lead to consequences for the authors and the communities formed around their work.
Affordances

The internet, as a technology of persuasion, works according to principles of accessibility, ubiquity, usability, and collaborative labor. How often it lives up to these principles, of course, is the subject of debate. Susan Delagrange writes that “New media can recuperate images and other modes of communication as legitimate forms of embodied rhetorical argument, and this moment of remediation from print to digital allows close examination of the underlying values and assumptions of both. Unfortunately the tendency is for new media to eventually absorb and re-inscribe older forms of discourse” (Technologies of Wonder, 16) and later that “For a new medium to justify its use, it must demonstrate that it is in some way ‘better’ than prior media. For example, simple digital remediation, like text-on-the-page to text-on-screen, might promise that it is better by reason of easier access or greater speed. Digital media might also offer ‘value added’” (26). Crowdfunding demonstrates such a justification in that it exists as a technology that works to remediate technologies of fundraising and investment. However, it also, in each new project, uses the ideology of remediation as a persuasive force unto itself; as we saw with Reading Rainbow and Tropes vs. Women in Video Games, an oft-used technique for Kickstarter projects is to show how, through the funds being raised, an author can remediate an older, beloved technology to enhance the values, functionality, and understanding offered – albeit limitedly – by its prior iterations.

Affordances, and the discussion about affordances, pervade even the least technically focused Kickstarter projects, and represents more than a predictive model for which regions or communities will back a project; they show how technologies of persuasion can enable or limit different rhetorical and generic moves, influencing how an author appeals to an audience, and who that audience is made up of. As older technologies of persuasion and investment have affordances that limit persuasive efforts in some ways, newer technologies step in to improve upon or enable new, previously unlikely rhetorical
situations. In turn, these opportunities for speech become part of the larger conversation, creating a network of influences that alter the way audiences use, and interpret the use of, technologies of rhetoric. For instance, in the study “Project Recommendation Using Heterogeneous Traits in Crowdfunding”, Rakesh, Choo and Reddy examined the features that determined a Kickstarter project’s success:

For our experiments, we obtained six months of Kickstarter data from kickspy. Our dataset spans from 12/15/13 to 06/15/14, which consists of 27,270 projects characterized by 30 project-based attributes...We begin by categorizing the features into four main groups: (a) project-based traits, (b) personality-based traits, (c) location-based traits, and (d) network-based traits. The project-based traits are purely those derived from the qualities of Kickstarter projects. The personality-based traits are further divided into creator personality and backer personality. It represents the characteristics of creators who host the Kickstarter project, and the backers who invest in these projects. In the location-based traits, we intend to understand the role of geo-location on Kickstarter projects. Lastly, the network-based traits are derived from the social media (Twitter) domain. In the following sections, we explain these features in detail (3-4).

From their analysis, they were able to conclude that “The temporal progression of funds, backers, and tweet promotions have the strongest variable importance...Backers strongly depend on their personal preferences to fund a project...The impact of social network monotonically decreases with the increase in backing frequency...Social network has stronger influence over backers who have their Twitter profile” and that “The influence of geo-location strongly depends on the topical category of the project”. In other words, their findings showed that, while affordances such as geographic location, network affordances, social media presence, and other, traditionally limiting factors that induce scarcity of resources, time, or information are less influential on the success or failure of a Kickstarter than the
content of the project itself, and, most tellingly, the communities surrounding the projects, as shown by
their assertion that “backers are strongly influenced by their topical preference and the trust
relationship towards the creator of projects...the backing habits are influenced by their social circle
(or community)” (9).

Similarly, the study “Persuading Crowds” by Murray et al. found that “the quality and quantity of
persuasion mechanisms employed by entrepreneurs during a crowdfunding campaign significantly
impacts the level of outside interest in their entrepreneurial project, which in turn impacts the level of
resources acquired for the project. We also find that an entrepreneur’s mindset about a project—
whether they have a growth or fixed orientation— impacts the learning actions that they take—active
versus passive learning—prior to launching a crowdfunding campaign, and those actions impact the
quantity and quality of the persuasion mechanisms employed” (2). Another study “Does Crowdfunding
Democratize Access to Capital”, which focuses on the effects of geography on crowdfunding, which
“extracted data regarding all transactions on Kickstarter from its inception to January 2013 and could
locate 35,156 successful projects, 33,022 unsuccessful projects, and 2,476 live projects” (8) further
focused on the affordances available to backers by, upon assembling their corpus, worked to examine
the “relevant demographic and socioeconomic variables from multiple sources” by examining the home
ownership rates, housing prices, internet connectivity, availability of banking, and population density of
cities in which significant levels of crowdfunding occurred. This study found the following:

We find that small cities appear to get a disproportionate benefit from crowdfunding. In
addition, we use a series of analyses to show that difficulty in accessing credit from banks
induces creators to rely more on crowdfunding to fund their projects. Moreover, this effect varies
across categories or across areas. We find that tighter credit constraints due to a drop in house
price have a stronger effect on creators who initiate larger projects and live in high income
MSAs. The impact of geographical proximity to banks is almost entirely via 'location-independent' projects that attract less from local people, whereas 'location-dependent' projects offered online are virtually immune from the competition between online crowdfunding and offline banks. Last, we see that house price change is influential only for MSAs that have low competition between banks in a local market, indicating that a credit shock from house price drop will be stronger for creators who have a higher cost of accessing retail banks (20).

They further concluded that “tech-related projects in game and technology tend to attract the vast majority of investments outside of their home regions. This shows sharp contrast with venture capital investments that are geographically concentrated” (21). Taken together, these three studies reveal important information about the affordances that influence crowdfunding, including the technical, the geographical, and the rhetorical. The influences of these affordances, in turn, impact the rhetorical approaches used by the authors of crowdfunding pitches. In crowdfunding geographical location, accessibility of digital technology, and socioeconomic environment are in and of themselves technical affordances for the goal of persuasive acts.

Put simply, “home region” is not the relevant measure of what sort of projects will be funded. Rather, it is, like the other affordances discussed, a technology for the assembling of communities, and the projects being funded are the traces – the evidence of successful persuasive acts – of these communities. Interest, ideologies, and identification represent the true face of the “Local” far more than where on the map these situations arise. And, as we will see, a lack of respect for the affordances of the genre as a thing unto itself (as opposed to viewing it as a form of investment similar to existing models of advertising and grant writing) can not only alienate participants in a current project, but poison an author’s reputation within the community at large. As discussed earlier, online authorship is, while less influenced and restricted by the technical constraints of time, distance, and material scarcity, still has its
own economies of time, attention, trust, and reciprocity. Online, failure to deliver on a project can be forgiven, but lying about it – or treating your audience like rubes – cannot.

RED ASHes to Ashes: The Tragic Hubris of Keiji Inafune

Keiji Inafune was a producer and illustrator for the video game company Capcom from 1987 – 2009. He is known throughout the gaming community as the “Father of Megaman” (Rockman in Japan), and is widely credited with the design, vision, and popularity of the long-running video game series. After leaving Capcom he went on to Kickstart the video game entitled *Mighty No. 9*, described on its Kickstarter page as “Classic Japanese side-scrolling action, evolved and transformed by Keiji Inafune, an all-star team of veteran Mega Man devs...and YOU!” The project, as of its funding date of October, 1, 2013, had raised nearly $4 million for its development. Two years later, Inafune’s company Comcept attempted to Kickstart another game, this one based on the cult-classic *Megaman Legends* series. The game, entitled *Red Ash* was described as “an opportunity to not only fulfill Keiji Inafune's desire to create a game that pays homage to Japanese animation, but also his vision of ‘immersing players in a freely explorable anime world.’ The RED ASH team is spearheaded by Art Director Kazushi Ito and Director Masahiro Yasuma, key members of the original team that pioneered open world game design with Mega Man Legends. With the RED ASH project, they aim to build an action adventure experience with a new level of freedom, complete with the polish expected from such veteran creators.” The project’s funding goal was $800,000, far less than *Mighty No. 9*’s initial goal of $900,000. However, come August 3, 2015, the project closed nearly $300,000 short of its funding goal. As per Kickstarter’s terms of use, this meant that Inafune and his company received no money to create their game.

Although *Red Ash* was later picked up by publisher FUZE Entertainment, its attempts at crowdfunding had failed, and by a large margin. This in and of itself is not remarkable. However, what is noteworthy is that, as with *Mighty No. 9*, *Red Ash*’s campaign demonstrated all of the rhetorical,
technical, and authoritative moves common to successful projects. It drew upon the legacy of a prior, beloved series, the reputation of a well-known group of authors, and the momentum of a previous, wildly successful crowdfunding project. Why, then, did it fail so spectacularly that the gaming press site Kotaku called it a “disaster” in an article published after its failure? How could the second project of a well-known producer of several iconic games and characters flounder after the first project’s initial success? After all, many of the projects by Double Fine Studios, inXile Entertainment, the Pebble Watch, and countless others led to subsequent projects on Kickstarter which benefitted from the original project’s success. The answer to this lies in Inafune’s mishandling of both the genre’s moves and the affordances – and the rhetorical, social, and communal values accompanying those affordances – of Kickstarter as a technology.

First, we must examine the pitch itself, which demonstrates several important deviations from the lexical, rhetorical, and genre structure of other crowdfunding projects from the subgenre of “Interactive Media”. The pitch, book-ended at the start and finish of the video by short skits from the game’s concept art to demonstrate the design and tone of the project, is translated from Japanese (emphasis mine):

Hello! My name is Keiji Inafune. Now that Mighty No. 9 development has drawn to a close, Comcept is looking towards our next challenge. The next challenge has to do with a goal I have had for a long time. I am talking about creating a game that captures the feeling of freely exploring an anime world. I believe that we were a little ahead of our time when we first attempted this concept. Unfortunately, the project did not see the success or conclusion it deserved. I mulled over this idea for a long time, and during that time I had the opportunity to meet with Studio 4C. From that meeting, I started to believe that with their cooperation I could make this goal of creating a true anime world inside a game a reality. I feel that if we were able
to succeed in combining the properties of traditional Japanese anime and the properties of traditional Japanese game design we can create a unique type of Action RPG that people the world over can enjoy. With the Mighty No. 9 project, we were able to achieve full creative freedom, thanks to Kickstarter. Now we want to use that same freedom to take on a new challenge. This RED ASH project is that new challenge. We want people around the world to look up to this project as an example of what Japanese creators are truly capable of.

From this short pitch, we find a tone, structure, and lexical emphasis that is very different from the usual crowdfunding pitch as seen in this study. First, there is a marked lack of collaborative, inclusive language moves, with Inafune almost exclusively using the first person pronoun. When he does speak in the plural, he is referring to an elite team of designers, leaving out any mention of the audience or their contributions to either this current project, or the success of Mighty No. 9. Second, there is an imbalance between the tenses; the future tense is all but absent from the discussion of the project, with more mention of what Inafune felt, did, and considered about previous work than what he intends or envisions for the new project. His discussion of the project (referring indirectly to his Megaman Legends series) makes no attempt to identify a source of division for his audience to align themselves against, and, without establishing a sense of community with his viewers to create feelings of identification, the discussion of his previous works as being unfairly panned feels more like bitter complaining than a shared experience or goal for his audience to work with him toward. Third, there is, in contrast to the absence of emphasizers and future predictions, an overabundance of hedging language, which, as Mitra and Gilbert showed, were predictors that the project would not be funded.

Moreover, by locating the goals of the project specifically within not only Japanese media and creative labor, but traditional Japanese creative labor, non-Japanese audience members are made to feel excluded, or at the very least of secondary importance, to the values, culture, and discursive goals
of the project. Although cultural factors, such as the different assumptions held in Japanese culture about authors, audiences, and the interplay of authority between the two, certainly influenced the rhetorical choices made by Inafune, these affordances are, I argue, less impactful on persuasion in the Digital Local than one might imagine. As we saw earlier in the chapter, for instance, crowdfunding – video game crowdfunding especially – is less influenced by geographical, cultural, and financial affordances or differences than it is by the identifications of shared interests and discursive awareness. Crowdfunding is, after all, an international genre, wherein the local is defined by community, which, as I have argued throughout this study, is drawn along lines of shared passions rather than shared spaces.

We can see how affordances like culture, age, and professional authority can take a back seat to genre savvy in the examination of another Kickstarter project by one of Inafune’s contemporaries. In chapter 3, we discussed the work of Koji Igarashi and his successful project Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night. Like Inafune, Igarashi’s project was partially funded through Kickstarter while, at the same time, being supported by traditional avenues of development and publication. Like Inafune, Igarashi’s pitch centered around the creative vision of a single, authoritative creator over the collaborative efforts of the community, and, most importantly, Igarashi is both a contemporary of Inafune’s, possesses a similar level of fame within his community, and was, according to an interview in Polygon Magazine, even inspired by Mighty No. 9. However, in examining the language and rhetorical moves performed by Igarashi in his own Kickstarter pitch, we see several key distinctions (emphasis mine):

Good evening, I am Koji Igarashi. You may be familiar with my legacy. I have been gone far too long, and it’s time for a resurrection! For years, I have wanted to continue exploring and refining this genre [of 2-D action games]. Publishers of the world told me that gamers no longer care for this style of game, but I know they are wrong! I need your help to bring my vision to life! A new action adventure game in the gothic horror
The spirit of this genre lives on in the hearts of others. It is my wish to rejoin the fray. I haven’t yet finished what I’ve started! And that’s why I’ve turned to Kickstarter.

We’ve found partners willing to support us with funding if we can prove a demand for this style of game. With their backing, the stability of our development will be secured. They have faith in our ability, but they need to see the support of the community [before contributing their funding]. By reaching the goal, I will have the funds needed to proceed, but with your continued generosity I can increase the scope and complexity...My passion is for this project to have the depth and complexity my works are known for. I have brought together many of my trusted collaborators from past projects to ensure this game is of the highest quality...Together, we can reclaim our passion and make a new future for the gothic style. Join my army of the night!

Although the pitch is not shy in discussing the project in terms of Igarashi’s vision, style, and ambitions, it does a far better job of situating the success of this goal equally in both Igarashi’s authority and talent as well as the support of the community. For instance, the specific references to Kickstarter and explanations about why and how the funds will be used show a genuine need for backers’ support. Moreover, the constant use of communal, inclusive language – set, notably – immediately before or after discussion of Igarashi’s abilities or vision – serves as an invitation for viewers to become one of his trusted collaborators. Similarly, there is a powerful sense of identification and division created by his dramatic assertion that the publishers who denied the genre he (and by extension his fans) love are wrong. Finally, and most importantly, is the transparency with which he discusses his relationship to his publishers and what this means for his audience and their support. By casting the “partners” as little more than security, referring to them as “they” while referring to his backers as “we”, and subsequently paralleling the contributions of his fans with “the depth and complexity” his works “are known for”, he implies that the symbolic-analytic labor of his backers constitutes the real, creative labor. His call for
backers to join his army of the night is a surprisingly apt metaphor; under his vision and leadership, his 
“army” will provide the needed support to defeat the wrong-headed publishers and return the genre to 
its rightful glory. By being forward and transparent with this, and by showing respect for, and knowledge 
of, the genre, Igarashi is able to make his backers’ contributions feel valued and reciprocated.

By contrast, Inafune’s pitch makes no mention of gratitude and reciprocity, and, most tellingly, 
shows a lack of any real, specific discussion of how this project will set out to achieve its goals or why – 
beyond the nebulously described “creative freedom” of Kickstarter – Inafune even needs his viewers’ 
help at all. As we have seen earlier, the language and discursive structure of this pitch lacks many of the 
moves that predict success for crowdfunding projects while containing an overabundance of moves 
which set audiences against it. Inafune takes for granted that the “success” of *Mighty No. 9* and his own 
reputation and that of his underappreciated *Megaman Legends* series would be enough to carry the 
pitch. Worse, however, is the casual mention of Kickstarter and the freedom it afforded him to develop 
*Mighty No. 9*. Ordinarily, this sort of nod to crowdfunding would have worked towards the success of 
the pitch, ingratiating viewers, making previous backers feel a sense of accomplishment, and showing 
gratitude and collaborative intentions, both of which are almost intrinsic to crowdfunding as a medium. 
However, several problems facing the development of *Mighty No. 9*, and later revelations about the 
publication of it and *Red Ash*, would not only undermine these sentiments, but poison them against 
Inafune, making him seem like less of a peer within his community than a manipulative outsider. As 
mentioned earlier, *Red Ash* failed to reach its Kickstarter goal, but was nevertheless picked up for 
publication by FUZE Entertainment. However, this publication deal was not announced after the project 
failed, but during the later stages of its fundraising. An update, posted to the Kickstarter page on July 29, 
2015, read as follows:
We said it before: we have been working very hard behind-the-scenes for RED ASH! Alongside our Kickstarter campaign, we’ve been in negotiations with hardware makers and development partners, keeping your feedback and comments in mind. We hoped by introducing the world setting, art documents, creators involved, our latest prototype, and more, we could convey the charm of RED ASH. And it seems like that work has paid off with FUZE Entertainment deciding to join your ranks as backers, in a major way!... The Kickstarter campaign is going 100% towards more content! Consider your pledge a contribution to stretch goals from here on out. Exactly what are those stretch goals? We’re sorry to say that will have to wait a little while longer! Like we said, we’re very busy with many behind-the-scenes things over here, and we apologize if you feel left in the dark. As you can see, the things we have brewing that are keeping us occupied are BIG, and all for the purpose of getting you RED ASH in its biggest, bestest form. That's the reason we’re less communicative than we’d like to be! We know we’re in the final days of our campaign, but we’d like to ask fans to continue their support of RED ASH! Your money is going towards 100% content now, so please look forward to the revised “stretch goals”!

Not only does this deal with FUZE give lie to the pitch video’s claim of appreciation for the freedom afforded by Kickstarter, the manner in which the update is presented undermines – or at least shows a lack of awareness for – one of the core values of crowdfunding as a metagene: transparency. Unlike Igarashi, who was up-front with his relationship to his new publishers, the pitch for Red Ash makes no mention of any support from outside of the community. As we saw with civic Kickstarter projects, the audience does not always need to be invited for direct collaboration throughout the development of a project; the expertise and effort of the author can, especially where activism is concerned, be important enough to the project that audiences are content to limit their symbolic-analytic labor to funding those efforts. However, even in the most author-centered projects, there is almost always the promise of transparency and accountability to viewers throughout the project’s funding, development, and release.
Comcept’s update, even in making the seemingly innocuous summary of working “behind-the-scenes for RED ASH”, shows that the viewer is not regarded as a peer or collaborator or even participant in the development of the project, but as little more than walking, talking wallets. Worse, the lack of concrete information about what, precisely, the Kickstarter is supposed to fund with the publishing deal now in place along with several problems with the development of Mighty No. 9 invites readers to wonder what else is being done behind their backs, and how much, if at all, Comcept and Inafune value their contributions – and their community – at all.

Furthermore, the success – and even the completion – of Inafune’s previous project, Mighty No. 9, was overstated in Red Ash’s pitch. As of this writing, Mighty No. 9 is still in development, having suffered several delays. A January 2016 update on the Kickstarter page described a host of technical issues leading to the third delay, and concluded with an apology: “For this 3rd delay of the game, we have no excuses for disappointing our fans and especially our backers once more. We want to take this chance to express our sincerest apologies to everyone who has looked forward to the release.” This, by itself, is not terribly unusual in the gaming community; delays, postponements, and technical difficulties are par for the course, and rare is the game that makes it to publication according to its initially projected schedule. What sets Mighty No. 9 apart, however, is the apparent dissonance between the promises made through the Kickstarter and the reality of the development. Moreover, the scale and ambition of Inafune, and his goals for establishing Mighty No. 9 as a new franchise to rival the older Megaman series, baffled many backers who were still frustrated over the game’s much-delayed production. Chris Carter of the gaming site Destructoid wrote the following about the Kickstarter project’s lessons (emphasis mine):

*Kickstarters have learned time and time again that physical production is much harder than it looks, but the digital side can become overbearing as well...promising that future delays won’t*
happen, and then delaying it right before release doesn’t look good. In fact, it hurts your overall image. While his follow-up Kickstarter, Red Ash, didn’t look nearly as inspired as Mighty No. 9, which was the perfect storm at the perfect time by the way (right when sticking it to your former publisher was cool), it’s very clear that confidence in Inafune was shook, especially when funding was pulled from Ash following more bad news about Mighty.

Worse, the news of a second delay prior to this was seemingly hidden from backers until after Red Ash’s Kickstarter project had closed. In reporting the second delay, Jason Schreier of the online gaming magazine Kotaku summarized it as follows: “On Friday, July 31, the magazine Game Informer reported that they’d talked to their parent company, GameStop, and discovered this wasn’t just some retail mixup—publisher Deep Silver had actually told the retail chain that the game wasn’t making it out in September...On Wednesday, August 5—less than two days after the Red Ash Kickstarter ended—Comcept officially announced the delay. And today, Yu wrote a Q&A to backers on the Mighty No. 9 forums with some explanation for what had happened and why they’d denied a rumor that turned out to be true.” Schreier concluded the article by asking, “If they knew they were running into major bugs that would require any sort of delay, why would they send out the message that everything was on track? If Deep Silver informed retailers on or before July 23 that they wouldn’t make the September release date, why didn’t they tell their damn Kickstarter backers?” More than just valid questions about ethical business practices, Schreier’s tone of frustrated, baffled incredulity reflects many backers’ own feelings of mistreatment at the hands of Comcept and Inafune. Taken together, we begin to see the underlying causes behind Red Ash’s failure, and that these causes had little—if anything—to do with the actual game.

Instead we see how Inafune squandered the social capital he’d accrued with fans and members of the community through two key missteps. First, he assumed the same affordances and cultural norms
for publication through Kickstarter that he had worked with in earlier, more traditional models of publication and production. Susan Delagrange writes that “The productive arts do not rely on a given knowledge set, but on a process of approximation that weds experience to the exigency of the moment. The knowledge of techné is contingent, created in the moment of making, and as such is a heuristic process of discovery” (36), and, as Benkler argues, creative work represents a commons more than a product, which, in turn, are divided based on whether they are regulated and the degree to which participation is open versus limited (61). For Benkler, authority figures in open, commons-based production networks, “can do nothing except persuade others to prevent them from developing anything they want and add it to their kernel, or to distribute that alternative version of the kernel. There is nothing he can do to prevent the entire community of users, or some subsection of it, from rejecting his judgment about what ought to be included” (105). Inafune’s mistake was to assume that the techné of traditional publication models – which, as shown earlier, are scarcity driven, closed-off systems where the production and publication of the project are separate based on professional disciplining – where he was used to being both an authority figure over the development of the text and to working in opaque, closed systems with a small team and a minimum of input from the community at large until after the publication of a project has concluded. His second mistake lay in the inability to create the right kinds of identification and division with his audience. His authority, the authorial trust he attempted to barter into capital, was rooted not in his status as an elevated outsider handing down texts from outside of a community, but on his ability to portray himself as aligned with his audience in the realization of a shared goal.

Failure to deliver on the promises of a crowdfunding pitch can, and often are, forgiven by the larger community as a whole. What is fatal to an author’s reputation, and subsequently the ability to use Kickstarter to facilitate his or her creative work, is in treating crowdfunding as just another way to raise money. There is, in crowdfunding and in all modes of communication, an ongoing process of exchange.
The currencies are time, attention, authority, power, money, reputation, and all of the other technologies of meaning making. And to use one technology of persuasion often means eschewing others, not as a matter of access but as one of ideological values. Inafune’s biggest mistake was in his perception of the “full creative freedom” afforded by Kickstarter; in assuming that freedom from the constraints, values, and affordances of publishing companies he failed to realize that he was still beholden to the creative, social, cultural, and ideological visions of a different authority; his backers. Just as Zack Brown’s potato salad should never have succeeded but did, Igarashi’s game should have, taking an entirely practices-based view, never have failed. And yet, because of these two anomalous projects we can see that, in the Digital Local, persuasion begins with a sense of belonging; for the author to show that he or she belongs, and for the audience to feel that it has its own role to play in shaping the community.

Conclusions

Matthew Kirschenbaum writes that “the tendency to elicit what is ‘new’ about new media by contrasting its radical mutability with the supposed material stolidity of older textual forms is a misplaced gesture, symptomatic of the general extent to which textual studies and new media theory have failed to communicate” (Mechanisms Location 1715). Indeed, much of the discussion around Kickstarter, and around digital media as a whole, tends to emphasize how it can, does, or fails to “free” authors and audiences and activists to communicate. This, however, not only misses the true utility of newer modes of persuasion, it can, as we saw with Inafune’s work, lead to rhetorical failures, or, as in the case of that infamous Potato Salad, leave people scratching their head, wondering what’s so damn important about a ten dollar lunch. In truth, there is no speech act free from the situation in which it occurs, and there is no situation that is not influenced by prior acts of persuasion and community-building.
As Consigny writes, a rhetor “finds himself ‘thrown’ into an indeterminate existential situation, in which he must make the best of the ‘facticities’ he encounters...the rhetor must find strategies for shaping the indeterminacies, thereby formulating concrete problems which can be potentially solved...the rhetor’s task is not to simply adopt an alternative ‘position,’ but rather to discover what position to adopt by making sense of the situational incoherencies”. “The rhetor’s task” he writes, “is not to answer questions and solve well-formulated problems, but rather to be able to ask good questions and to formulate or discover relevant problems in an indeterminate situation” (177).

As such, it is unlikely that crowdfunding will turn the industries of publishing, academic discourse, creative production, or local activism on their heads and allow for an open, democratizing, crowd-driven push towards a more egalitarian means of production. An academic, for instance, would be hard-pressed to fund a project that does not produce some kind of technical artifact or meaningful, immediate, social change. The academy tends, after all, to be a cloistered, insular community, whose discourses are shaped by centuries of rhetorical traditions and cultural norms uncommon to the rest of the world. Moreover, the very perception of what constitutes a valuable contribution to the field is likely to be defined along these same rigid, highly credentialed, disciplinary lines, making them a hard sell to larger discourse communities. Besides; if an academic or scholar or scientist can argue for the value of a project to his or her disciplinary community, why not simply make use of the funding systems of grants and scholarships already in place? Crowdfunding, then, is less a new and sexy way to raise money for the same old work than it is a technology of community building, whereby projects that can either bring disparate communities together, such as Reading Rainbow or Tropes vs. Women in Video Games, or can unify existing communities around the creation of a discursive text which may shape the community in ways that are seen as underrepresented by traditional modes of publication, as was the case with Double Fine Adventure and the Oculus Rift. It is, in short, a new space – a new technology – for the
creation of rhetorical situations, and, as with all rhetorical situations, questions of audience, timing, context, authorship, and countless other affordances interact to alter the shape of effective persuasion.

What humanities scholars can gain from – and give to – the study of crowdfunding and digital media are the insights it offers into the ways in which these rhetorical situations are created, and how affordances of technology, social capital, monetary capital, trust, language, culture, conflict, place, and interest align to shape and reshape the kind of speech acts regarded as persuasive or not persuasive, as well as how people build on these rhetorical situations to create meaning, identity, and community. As I have previously argued, crowdfunding does not provide complete creative freedom for authors, only a different set of constraints. As we saw in the analysis of crowdfunding’s data earlier in this chapter, there exist measurable “rules” for this kind of discourse which authors approaching the genre ignore at their own peril. In light of these rules for discourse, the question of how a Potato Salad could earn so much money where activism efforts and other, “worthier” projects went unfunded becomes simple to answer; Brown was able to show himself as an insider of a community who uses money to voice approval with their preferred discourses. Parody, after all, requires not only an understanding of the genre which one is satirizing, but also a deeply internalized appreciation for, and knowledge of, the values to which it ascribes. As Christine Harold writes, “one’s rhetorical tools need not come from outside at all, as an oppositional model might insist…sabotage is not a chaotic, shapeless, anarchic practice, but one that is restrained and shaped by the machinery from which it emerges” (197). In other words, a successful parody uses the protocols of the community to both comment on, and demonstrate expertise in, the lexical and rhetorical forms of the community itself. It just so happens that the way this particular community shows its appreciation is through low-stakes donation. By contrast, as we saw in the case of Inafune’s failure with Red Ash, one cannot simply brute-force one’s way past these rhetorical affordances, no matter how much social capital has fattened one’s coffers. Money is a technology of persuasion. As we see through our examination of crowdfunding, its value and utility and ability to
bestow authority is not universal, but is, instead, a product of the local. This is, in the end, the potential of studying the digital local itself; in measuring how technologies of persuasion, even those like money and authorship, affect one another through their affordances and persuasive situations, we may, in turn, learn about how these systems work in other, “realer” rhetorical situations such as the geographical local, the governmental local, or, as we will see in chapter five, the rhetorical space most familiar to the humanities; the writing classroom.
CHAPTER FIVE

What is this Assignment Worth?

The writing classroom is a lot of things. Depending on whom you ask it could be a safe space, a contact zone, a place of enculturation, a place to escape from enculturation, to learn a skill, to break away from the skill-and-drill model, an egalitarian dialogue, a hierarchical monologue, and so on and so on. The roles of teacher, student, power, language, culture, and political economy have been the subject of fierce, ideologically guided argument since Plato and the Sophists first gave each other the side eye. Ultimately, however, the writing classroom is, in any shape, modality, or locale, a rhetorical situation: a place where interlocutors come together, each of them with their own goals, agendas, ideologies, and techniques for persuasion. The writing classroom is, even if only for the odd hour or so in which teachers and students are gathered, a community. It is, therefore, a technology of persuasion. It is, therefore, local.

Like any local place, then, it is also a nexus where technologies, techne, and cultures are brought to bear in order to aid the many persuasive acts occurring between teachers and students. It is not, however, a community of equals. Like crowdfunding (or, I would argue, any place where people are interacting) there is an imbalance of power between the teacher and the student; even the idea of the “local” is unbalanced, as the teacher is likely to have spent more time in the “place” of the classroom, and comes into it each day vested with the power of valuation by the university, and by the credentialing force it carries. The teacher is thus free to assign value to the texts generated by the members of the classroom-as-discourse community, much like backers grant value to the projects posted to Kickstarter; through capital. As a credentialing mark, a grade carries with it economic force not far removed from money. After all, a high grade can lead to scholarships, acceptance within a professional community, and degrees and honors which enable a wider range of job prospects upon
graduation. Therefore, writing that earns strong grades is not only possessed of an educational value, it is also imbued with its own economic force, and from that force value within the community where it will be examined, reproduced, reversioned, and emulated. This process, however, is one way: a student cannot grade a teacher (at least not with the same economic weight – rate my professor does not affect salary after all), nor is he or she in a position to freely create texts in a voice, style, or discourse not matching the teacher’s (and by extension the University’s) values of “good” writing. More than just being disempowering, however, this can even affect the ways students communicate, and the ways in which they approach the “place” of the writing classroom, not necessarily as learners, but as outsiders approaching an unfamiliar, sometimes hostile rhetorical situation. In “Inventing the University”, David Bartholomae writes that “The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience, as though he were a member of the academy” (524). For Bartholomae, the problems facing student writers are not rooted in a lack of development or understanding, but in the students’ difficulties in assuming the authoritative voice without parroting terms or falling back on aphorisms. He argues that “they have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom; and they…have to do it before they know what they are doing” (544). This requires that they “invent” an approximation of the university, and its expectations of them, each time they set out to write.

Similarly, Mike Rose writes that many genre standards in academic writing serve to do little other than alienate students, frustrate teachers, and perform the outdated function of “gatekeeping”, as if those who come into the hallowed halls of higher education should either already have both the knowledge and understanding that academics possess. Rose writes that academics define literacy, for instance, in terms of our students’ knowledge, which “is often incomplete and fragmented and is not organized in ways that they can readily use in academic writing situations” the problem with this idea, however, is that by tagging a group as illiterate “you’ve judged their morals and their minds” (597). And,
according to Bizzell, Schroeder, and Fox, the discourses of the writing classroom are more strategic than tactical (12).

That said, the student is not powerless. Like the internet, the classroom is a place where multiple currencies converge and interact. Where the teacher has the economic force of the grade to create value for his or her lessons – a lecture is, after all, the presentation of a set of practices for earning a more "valuable" grade – the student has the resources of time and attention to invest or withhold, “buying in” to lessons, exercises, and techniques that seem to promise the most return. Like crowdfunding, however, “seem” is the key word here, as no guarantee exists that a teacher’s lessons and assignments, no matter how focused on shortening the power gap between teacher and student, will yield the results that a student values. The teacher is, thus, making a “pitch” with each class, building credibility through various rhetorical, technological, and cultural actions geared to the values of the discourse community of the class. As Reid argues in The Two Virtuals “the simple act of naming an activity as pedagogical situates that activity within a certain ideological context, particularly when that naming coincides with the location of that activity in a college campus classroom” (158), and that because of this, “The students subordinate themselves to the professor’s directions...[t]hey exchange their subjective, cognitive labor for a grade and credits” (159). This, however, is only one side of the exchange, as Reid continues that “pedagogy has an undeniable cybernetic function, but cybernetics does not have to be viewed as a process of external control...it can be articulated as a proprioceptive process of becoming where pedagogy’s abstract mechanisms shape cognition in a non-deterministic way” (160). Students, like backers, can then decide to “buy in” with their resources of time and attention, or, if not persuaded to trust their instructor’s authority and expertise, disengage with the class, falling back upon the genre characteristics of “academic writing” as a whole, writing in ways that are bland, superficial, but safe, leading to the stilted, “basic” writing discussed by Rose and Bartholomae and others. In many ways, I would argue, the oft-lamented writing of the new college student does not
represent a failure of student writers, but on the contrary, a level of savvy genre awareness of larger discourses beyond the classroom, and an ability to learn the performance of these genres enough to achieve their own goals. Therefore, to me, the writing classroom is a place where teachers and students should not seek equity of power or the performance of best practices, but an alignment of goals, values, and discourse. As humanists, teachers of writing often seek the empowerment of their students as the primary value of their work; a classroom of critically thinking, engaged lifelong learners represents, for many, a “successful” pedagogical action as the reaching of a funding goal measures the success of a crowdfunded project. To be successful, in this model, relies not just on practical and technical excellence from the teacher, but on the ability for that teacher to create “buy in” from the students, which, as on crowdfunding, can be withheld or withdrawn at any time should there be a sense of division or a lack of appreciation for the discourses that they value.

Crowdsourcing and crowdfunding, then, are indeed of use in the writing classroom, but not merely as ways for students to do their work, or for fundraising to support the increasingly strapped-for-cash disciplines of the humanities. Instead, the value of such commons-based technologies of production lies in two distinct aspects, which I will explore throughout this chapter: The first is as a metaphor by which we can better understand the act of teaching itself, and the ways in which authority within communities is not something to be jealously guarded or done away with, but something to be understood and approached as an ongoing negotiation of power, expertise, hierarchy, and meaning-making. The second is as a technology of persuasion which, with enough forethought and flexibility, can be brought into the writing classroom in ways that allow students to write as experts within communities and discourses with which they are actually familiar and personally invested in. This process may, in part, constitute what Reid calls “event pedagogy” which “does not open up some ‘free’ space but instead allows for the development of critical strategies to address the material operation of power” (168). Doing so, I will argue, can help to mitigate the appropriating weight of academic
discourse, provide students with work that is intrinsically valuable to them within their fields or interests, and make transparent the ways in which authorship and authority are not the product of inscrutable cultural mandate from on high, but the product of successful discursive actions within specific communities. It may, in effect, help us teach students how their writing can serve to create, shape, and negotiate within the local.

**Risks and Rewards: Teaching as Crowdfunding**

All students, traditional and non-traditional, come to the blank page from a position of uncertainty. Although the material consequences of a bad mark should not be minimized in the current academic climate, there is more at stake for the developing writer than simply a grade. To write is to give form to one’s thoughts, to invent and codify knowledge based on a complex array of personal literacies, lived experiences, academic expectations, and the pulls of power and discourse. More than that, it is to submit this complex process to the critical judgment of the teacher, an expert who, all too often, has a very different definition of “basic” knowledge than the student. In the humanities, we often wonder why our students are so reticent; why writing is regarded with dread; why our position within the academy is built on the foundation of required courses and writing portfolios. We sometimes forget, however, that the desire – to say nothing of the ability – to deconstruct the rhetoric of a text is the end result of years in specialized study of writing. Every student who utters “I’m not good at writing” is actually saying “I don’t know what you want me to say.” For the “traditional” student, this frustration may lead to parroting, unenthusiastic writing, or plagiarism. For non-traditional students, however, the fears behind this doubt may be far more material.

Speaking about non-traditional students, such as first-generation, international, L2, and economically underprivileged students, Elaine Fredericksen writes that students have difficulty trusting themselves as writers. Along with guilt at juggling the immediate responsibilities of family and work with
the long-term, ephemeral rewards promised by higher education, Frederiksen argues that these students may experience intense frustration with speaking and writing this is because they “lack of power in the academic setting” and are “subservient to their instructors and often also to the domination of more-traditional students” which “can fill them with anger and resentment. These emotions also invoke silence” (120). In addition to silence, the challenges of economic hardship and the stigma of attending college at a different age than “normal” students may lead the student to fall back on what Ken Macrorie calls “Engfish”, a highly conventional, inauthentic writing in an effort to minimize the chance of failing the class in order to simply get by (Telling Writing). And, according to Mike Rose, for many students, fear can sabotage their educational efforts by encouraging them to rely on “intellectual strategies” that may have served them in High School or other contexts that simply do not work in higher education. Moreover, this fear can even prevent them from asking much-needed questions:

A related issue is a reluctance to seek help. This reluctance can be rooted in pride and notions of self-reliance. It can stem from shyness or embarrassment. But something else can be at play: an unfamiliarity or lack of comfort with help-seeking behavior within institutions. Many students with privileged educational backgrounds are socialized from day one to seek out resources and engage members of institutions to help them attain their goals. This seems so much like second nature to most academics that we forget that it is a culturally influenced, learned behavior (The Missing Element in Student Success).

In short, writing is not only hard, it’s also risky. Each time a student, especially one from a non-traditional background, sits down to face a new assignment, he or she is contending not only with the uncertainty of communicating in a new genre for a new, little-understood discourse community but also with the looming specter of his or her grade and the powerful material weight it carries. For teachers
this can sometimes be difficult to understand, as the very nature of the classroom as local space flattens these “outside” considerations, attempting to homogenize the goal of teacher and students alike into one monolithic, but hopelessly simplistic, agenda: produce quality writing. However, this flattening elides the material concerns – persuasive forces in their own right – that first drove the student to college, and to the writing classroom, in the first place.

The significance of students and their motivations, while often written about, studied, and examined, is all-too-often done so in terms of a problem to be solved. Professionalization may be regarded as a concern for politicians or administrators rather than for teachers, and students who profess such material motivations for pursuing education are often framed as either unserious or helplessly conditioned by capitalistic ideologies. For instance, in Technologies of Wonder, Susan Delagrange laments the materialistic turn of the university, writing that many students, “Influenced by the consumer model of education that is so prevalent today” may “see their education as primarily a credential, and perhaps a set of functional skills, rather than as the acquisition of habits of mind and thought. They tend not to see the structure of the world they live in as changeable; furthermore, many do not see their world as in need of change, and even if they do, they don’t picture themselves as agents of that change” (167). Similarly, J. Blake Scott calls for service learning in technical writing courses, arguing that students’ resistance to “impractical”, socially oriented writing classrooms is a byproduct of the corporatization of higher education. He writes that “students’ desire for a practical education, the disciplinary emphasis on uncritical accommodation, and the institutional and cultural emphasis on preparation for corporate success all work to maintain a pedagogy that facilitates praxis but not phronesis” (Critical Power Tools, Location 3249). These critiques are framed in broader, institutional terms, but to me they also seem to point an accusatory finger at students. Certainly cultural forces are the origins of such materialism, they seem to argue, but our students are also to blame for buying into materialistic ideology, whether as helpless dupes or privileged pragmatists.
Viewing our students as subjects in need of saving, however, reduces the needs, interests, and concerns of students to problems for teachers to solve in an effort to “transform” them into “life-long learners”, ignoring the possibility that even the least-interested student may not need or want to be transformed as well as the simple fact that students – like anybody else – are already lifelong learners different from us only in the contexts, goals, and places in which they did their prior learning. As Bizzell et al. write, “If a critical goal in literacy instruction...is to help students forge connections between what they already know as language users and the more that is available to be known...the mandate is to search for classroom experiences that build upon and enhance experiences that permit the re-definition and reconfiguration of acceptable forms of expression” (27). It is with this argument in mind that I propose that for instructors in the teaching of writing – both technical and professional writing and college composition for the purposes of this paper – it may be beneficial to approach the classroom as neither a hierarchical space where knowledge is passed down from expert to amateur nor as a place where structures of power and expertise are done away with in a kind of student-directed pedagogical anarchy. Students, especially non-traditional students, are already juggling a great many roles and intersecting communities as they go from home to work to class and back again; to foist the responsibilities of their education in academic writing – a discourse with which, as previously discussed, they are at best only conventionally familiar – is sure to leave them frustrated, confused, and eager to find safe, formulaic discourses out of sheer survival. However, to take the reins entirely away is to succumb to a “gatekeeping mentality” which privileges only one type of learning and expertise, ignoring or dismissing the voices and ideas and knowledge which students bring in to the classroom from their lives and careers.

Ultimately, writing is, at its core, a technology of persuasion, and the teaching of writing is, itself, a technology of disciplinary induction. In order to balance the needs of the students with the loftier goals of writing pedagogy, it is critical, I argue, to think of teaching in terms of “user-centered
technology.” In order to create a user-centered technology, the formerly-infallible expert must design
the technology with a mind for “the localized situation within the user resides” (129). Applied to the
classroom, then, this means that the assignments and lessons offered must treat the student as critical,
creative agents with an active say in the course’s development. It’s not enough for me to give
assignments, promising that the lessons will be useful to the students at some unspecified future date,
since this risks casting my students as uninformed “idiots” and the classroom as a technology that
emphasizes “the notion that the inventors or developers of the technology know best its design,
dissemination, and intended use” (25). This can be a difficult balance to maintain, however, as
oftentimes the perceived needs of a student’s field may conflict with his or her own interests, or the
student might “want” nothing more than to learn the best practices for using whatever technology or
genre is currently in demand, sparing little thought for the rapidly changing nature of the modern, digital
workplace. However, such “instrumental”, or “best-practices” approach that Moore (and many
students) would likely demand from the technical writing classroom runs the risk of falling into the
“extreme usability” warned against by Dilger. This, in turn, could limit students’ growth, since even then,
the practices taught to them may no longer be “best” by the time they enter the work-force. How, then,
to strike the balance between the two?

This is where crowdfunding can serve as a powerful metaphor for the pedagogical “place” of the
classroom. As I’ve argued throughout this study, “success” on crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter is not
won through purely open collaboration with audiences, nor is it earned through rigid, tyrannical control
over the production of a text. As we saw with Inafune’s failed Red Ash project, even dedicated fans can
“opt out” if they feel disrespected or unappreciated by an author. This feeling of underappreciation
stems, in large part, from the lack of respect implied by an unwillingness or inability to understand the
needs, discursive practices, and affordances available to the community to which one is trying to appeal.
Teaching is similar. Joseph Harris writes that “recent social views of writing have also often presented
university discourse as almost wholly foreign to many of our students, raising questions not only about their chances of ever learning to use such an alien tongue, but why they should want to do so in the first place” (134). Indeed, this is a question that I believe should be at the center of every writing teacher’s pedagogy, not out of any cynical materialism, but out of respect for students’ time, values, knowledge, and life-goals that brought them to our classes. This process must begin, I believe, with an effort on the part of the teacher to build writing assignments that have a deliberate emphasis on authenticity and accessibility. I have, in the above passages, painted a rather grim picture of non-traditional learners’ situation, but they do bring a unique array of skills that, properly channeled, can empower them and bolster their writing studies. We need to think about what students already know, what they need to learn, and how we can best bridge the gap between the two using our lessons and assignments. Not only that, but we must be able to “sell” each assignment, lesson, and, indeed, even the classroom as a community itself to students as something worth the investment of their time and attention.

I argue that teachers of writing can most readily do this by understanding, and speaking to, the intrinsic motivations that drive students. Even the most grade-oriented, emotionally distant student has values and goals which the material reward of a good grade symbolizes progress towards, and being able to appeal to them not quite as peers or collaborators, but with the same respect for those community values shown on crowdfunding, may not only allow teachers to earn more “buy in” from cynical students, but may even encourage respectful, tactical dialogue and learning that adapts, values, and makes worthwhile use of the disciplines and conventions favored even by those studying for entry into disciplines outside of the humanities. This needn’t even be done by learning the endless body of ever-changing discourses and conventions present within the academy; simply structuring one’s pedagogy to allow for students to customize their work in the writing classroom by drawing on their own familiar discursive practices (and vice versa) can be enough; even such a minor display of transparency
and commons-based production shows both authority and respect, encouraging the necessary buy in for effective learning and critical thinking about the disciplines.

This is, of course, a metaphor fraught with meaning and implication, not all of which is necessarily positive. After all, nothing raises a teacher’s hackles like referring to students as “customers” and the classroom as a business. What I am arguing, however, is not necessarily that teachers of writing should adopt a business-like, “extreme usability” model of teaching, attempting to be the salesman for humanistic values. Instead, I am arguing that, if we broaden our ideas of economies to include time, attention, and respect as holding their own symbolic analytic currency, we, as teachers, can strike a stable balance between Socrates and Salesman. The key distinction is that the classroom-as-local is not a market of capital but of time and attention, where convincing students to “invest” in our lessons is not about selling the humanities as a product, but about showing how identification, division, authorship, and symbolic labor are created and utilized across the disciplines.

We saw with several Kickstarter projects, for instance, that the actual product promised matters less than an author’s ability to create a sense of belonging between him or herself and his or her audience, and as in the classroom, that feeling contains tangible value, both persuasive and economical, online. As I discussed in chapter two, digital cultures, such as 4chan or Tumblr, create identification, and through identification the ability to generate text and participate in discourses within these communities, through lexical and genre conventions. The ability to perform expertise with these conventions allows for belonging, rhetorical power, and communal symbolic action that is restricted to those who are viewed as outsiders. This is also true in the classroom, but with much higher stakes: by framing academic genres as key to accessing university culture, and by presuming that students should already be aware of these generic characteristics, teachers risk forcing students into a system where they feel unable to show any gaps in knowledge for fear of “outing” themselves as members of a
devalued, non-dominant culture. At best, such an environment would only teach students how to not rock the boat. It is, therefore, important to teach writing in a way that is flexible, rhetorically inclusive, and offers students both pragmatic, practice-based knowledge as well as symbolic, ideological awareness of the political, social, and cultural landscapes into which they seek to enter. As I will argue in the next section, one way to do this is to teach writing through the lens of genre.

Best(ish) Practices: Using Crowdfunding in the Writing Classroom

I want to stress right away that this section is not about using crowdfunding to raise money for a class or project (or about making students do so). Nor is it about making writing exercises in the classroom (or the course design of the class itself) entirely crowdsourced. The former, I have argued, is unlikely to work, as the community of the academy is both too specialized in its discursive practices to encourage the mass-participation needed for successful crowdfunding and so culturally “stable” that it already has several better-understood practices for the raising of funding for academic or pedagogical labor. The latter, similarly, not only foists too much symbolic analytic labor onto students – who themselves are busy learning the discourses of their new community to effectively plan or manage crowdsourced labor – it also misses the point of crowdsourcing in the first place, which is not the negation of hierarchy or of authorial control, but of rendering transparent, open to collaboration, and able to be altered or remixed with the right expertise and labor. Katherine Hayles writes that “Collaboration is not...without its own problems and challenges...internal procedures for distributing authority, making editorial decisions, and apportioning credit...are typically worked out on a case-by-case basis with digital humanities projects” (53), meaning that collaboration, while tactically useful in the teaching of writing, is always affected by constraints of credentialing, authority, expertise, and culture. While digital technologies allow for different affordances (and therefore values) through which to approach collaboration, it is not a level playing field, but one influenced by the structures of power
and authority attached to the community in which the work takes place. Students are aware of this, and many of them are concerned foremost with navigating the myriad discourses foisted upon them well enough to survive; to foist the role of peer onto them is not only presumptuous, but risks colonizing their growing knowledge of discourses and knowledges about discourse with our own. We may, through incentivizing students to limit, or cordon off certain means of discourse, also be limiting their ability to make complex connections, or to use the skills from their studies in the wider world at large. In short, bringing money or crowdsourced labor into the classroom unfiltered may do more harm than good; commons-based peer production is, as Benkler argues, based on intrinsic values held by participants. However, it is important to remember that teachers and scholars of writing hold different intrinsic values from students, and that, as Minh Zhann-Lu says, in learning the various discourses of his or her lives, careers, and cultural histories, a language learner “gains access to a range of competing discourse which offer competing views of oneself, the world, and one’s relation to the world...[because] different discourses do not enjoy equal political power in current-day America, decisions on how to respond to such dissonance are never politically innocent” (773).

This is not to say, however, that crowdfunding cannot be used to teach writing to a wide array of students and for a wide array of writing specializations. To do so, however, I believe it is important not to view it as a technology to be appropriated to teaching the genre of academic writing but as a technology of genre studies in general. Genre based pedagogy, outlined by Ann Wennerstrom in Discourse Analysis in the Language Classroom, can serve as a means for students to examine their existing bodies of rhetorical knowledge and to engage in new forms of authentic communication. Wennerstrom defines discourse analysis as “the study of naturally occurring language in the context in which it is used...[it] can be used both as a structural tool to better grasp how texts are organized and as an ethnographic tool to broaden one’s understanding of cultural dynamics” (6). Discourse analysis encourages students to examine genres in order to “focus explicitly on how they are structured...to
increase [students’] repertoire of genres and to provide them with a better chance of competing in the cultural marketplace” (34) it also “allows for a specific targeting of lexicogrammatical features. A focused concentration on particular structures facilitates the language acquisition process, as learners compare these structures to their current inter-language hypothesis” (36). In focusing on naturally occurring language use, students can demystify conventions and approach them from a less threatening perspective than would be possible by jumping right into an academic context.

Class exercises built around Kickstarter could begin with the analysis, composition, and distribution of the “pitches” used to attract interest to a project. As I’ve previously argued, a successful Kickstarter proposal, demonstrates awareness of the needs, knowledge, and jargon of smaller discourse communities. In studying how these generic, persuasive tropes are used to raise real money for real projects, students can learn how to tailor their language for a variety of audiences. They will also learn how experts organize communities around interests or ideas, and examine the ways in which they themselves are subject to persuasion. This process, more than just passive genre analysis, fits into the “textual-mediation” style of composition pedagogy, which, according to Warschauer, “links the concepts of expression, interaction, reflection, problem-solving, critical thinking, and literacy with the various uses of talk, text, inquiry, and collaboration in the classroom” (472). This, in turn, creates the opportunity for collaborative, outwardly focused language use. Such assignments, despite potentially involving a component of web-design, multimodal composing, and extensive use of online tools, are still primarily built around the teaching and practice of standard, rhetorically situated text-based writing. Although they make extensive use of multimodal communication techniques like video, music, and interviews, Kickstarter pitches are, essentially, grant requests designed for an audience of experts. Multimodal, digitally-mediated composition does not need to distract students from the primary focus of the writing classroom: writing. In fact, the use of multimodal, digital texts can expand students’ knowledge of traditional composition by providing a different lens through which to view it. Jody Shipka
illustrates this convincingly in *Towards a Composition Made Whole*, where, ultimately, she concludes that “treating writing in relation to other modalities means that the purposes and potentials of alphabetic text can be attended to throughout the course of the semester, provided, those...are treated with a mind toward the way other semiotic systems...impact one’s reception of the text” (137). Before anything digital can even occur, the student must be able to produce effective, persuasive writing.

In creating or examining pitches from their own interests, students can engage firsthand with texts on the cutting edge of their disciplines. This will allow for a wide variety of texts and discourses to be brought into the classroom without requiring strict, authoritarian control from the teacher. Kathleen Yancey argues that, as students do more and more of their writing online, that “we are witnessing a parallel creation of a writing public made plural, and as in the case of the development of a reading public, it’s taking place largely outside of the school... unlike what happens in our classes, no one is forcing this public to write. There are no As here, no Dean’s lists, no writing teacher to keep tabs on you” (795). Yancey presents a view of writing that begins outside of the classroom, where, using online spaces, students are already composing their own – often highly sophisticated – texts. By bringing Kickstarter into the writing classroom, students can write in genres already familiar to them. These genres, despite being unified by a single service, are as diverse as the students themselves. Kickstarter covers a vast array of fields, with projects ranging from technology to video games to creative works to local activism. Rather than serving as a barrier to understanding, any differences can become a subject for discussion. Moreover, in this model, the teacher ceases to be a gatekeeper of “good writing” and becomes, instead, a facilitator for the student’s own work. As experts in the subgenres they have chosen, this empowers students to instruct the teacher, and creates opportunities for the teacher to connect these practical lessons to the more common genres of power valued within the academy.
Finally, Kickstarter allows students to produce texts that they may be able to use outside of the writing classroom. Rather than being artificially constrained by the context of their status as learners, a project which calls for them to produce, if not a video than the script for one, could, due to the open nature of Kickstarter, be placed online at the student’s discretion, creating an opportunity for a real project to receive real funding. Tasks designed around pragmatic, transferable texts utilize what Warschauer calls “situated learning” which “occurs at a microlevel anytime a language student engages in the types of authentic communication needed outside the classroom” and is, in addition to being pragmatic, uniquely suited to “computer mediated collaborative learning” (477). This also represents a “metacommunicative” style of learning, which Shipka writes, is uniquely oriented towards the students’ own growth and empowerment in “the responsibility it places on students to determine the purposes of their work and how best to achieve them” (87). She goes on to argue that “frameworks that provide students with the opportunities to move between – while reflecting upon – the affordances and constraints associated with different representational systems and ways of knowing may better prepare students for the variety of intellectual and interpersonal activities they will likely encounter in other classes, in extracurricular spaces, as well as in their future professions” (107). In other words, Kickstarter can, if properly contextualized, avoid the problems of both academic alienation and mercenary time management among non-traditional learners. A materially useful, student-directed sequence of assignments needs no flowery justification; the rewards for learning to write are already established by the students’ personal passions.

There are, of course, limitations to this which must be accounted for. As with the inclusion of any new technology in the classroom, Kickstarter should neither be used for its own sake, nor should it be used to simply put a new coat of makeup on the same old modes of composition. Cynthia Selfe writes that, when using digital technologies in the classroom, it is important to consider the affordances of the technology, what those affordances enable (or hinder) in communication and learning, and how
accessible such technologies are for students (and how well they can use the interfaces of said technologies). In short, she argues, it is important to consider what technologies of communication, persuasion, and education allow for, and how we, as teachers, can risk limiting the ways in which students can explore those affordances (Towards a Composition Made Whole, 644-645).

Indeed, technology, if used without an understanding or appreciation for the ideologies implied in its affordances, can serve only to reify existing problems with the college classroom while wasting students’ time and attention (limited resources both, as I’ve said) on fighting to learn, navigate, and effectively use new technologies. As Hawisher and Selfe explain, this evaluative power is shown to be detrimental to open exchange between students as "classmates seemed to be searching for answers to the instructor's preset questions. And only three or four students were participating...Ostensibly computers were being used to 'share' writing, but the effect of such sharing was to make the class more teacher-centered and teacher-controlled." (61) Or, to put it more directly, when a teacher's presence is felt as a force of evaluation and hierarchy, students will fall back into the standard academic model of discussions that are "predominantly shaped by the value our society places on strong authority and competitiveness," (Cooper and Selfe, 852) and by "by giving up their total authority over how learning should take place and how to evaluate what has taken place, teachers enable students to learn how to learn" (857). Used improperly, new technologies of persuasion can create a second barrier between the student and the already-hostile-seeming discourse community of the writing classroom; the student is already fighting to learn and internalize the discursive practices expected by the teacher, to demand that they do so while, at the same time, learning not just to operate but work creatively and critically with new, unfamiliar technologies (and by doing so grapple with the effects the technology's affordances have on the persuasive process), is to quickly exhaust the reserve of time and attention they are willing to invest in the class, in turn leading to what I call “Powerpoint Syndrome”, where students use familiar technologies in a perfunctory, limited way, the better to mollify their teacher while doing
their best to reverse-remediate a new technology to fit the more familiar rhetorical affordances of an older one.

This is not, I believe, laziness on their part; it is another way of surviving the often confusing discursive demands of the academy. Given the choice between expertise in a technology for discourse or the discourse itself, students faced with an improperly used technology like Kickstarter are certainly likely to choose the latter. We must also remember that even for the most digitally savvy students, bringing new technologies into the writing classroom risks disrupting not only the understanding they’ve built up about the academic discourse community, but their understanding of how to use digital technologies. For many digitally proficient students online writing, social media, and crowdsourced labor represent distinct communities, separate from the discourses, values, and currencies of the classroom. One need only watch a student checking Facebook or Twitter while they are “supposed” to be working on reading or writing for the class to see the contradiction; in both cases the student is engaging with composition and persuasion, but one, the assignment, is an artifact of a professional / educational place, while the other, their digital communications, are artifacts of the personal. To attempt to force one into the other is not only misguided but even colonizing – at its worst, it can seem to the student as an attempt to impose the classroom-as-place onto the student’s own personal-life-as-place without consideration for the students’ time, values, or ability to manage the two. This is, per deCerteau, the actions of strategic force rather than tactical navigation; just as strategies impose ideologies onto space, so too can the inelegant use of social media or crowdsourcing in the classroom impose the dominant discourses of the academy (itself a potentially hegemonic, colonizing institution) onto the students’ own digital local. When using crowdfunding, crowdsourcing, or, indeed, any technology of persuasion in the writing classroom, the, if you’ll pardon the term, best practices a teacher can take are to build lessons that encourage critical engagement with both the persuasive act itself and with the lessons that the use of technologies to facilitate that act can reveal about the rhetorical situations in which it occurs, and also
to allow for students to use that technology as expert users, able to adapt and remix the discourses with which they are familiar to the protocols of the classroom. We must, in short, encourage students to use technology and discourse to engage in *la perruque* within the structure of the academy; not, by enforcing rigid discursive and technical practices, encourage students to do so with us.

**Conclusion**

Understanding Kickstarter will not transform our classes into utopian places free of coercion or hierarchy. Nor will examining the rhetorical acts that occur on this new medium allow us to break away from the cultural, economic, and strategic power structures that shape, inform, and limit possibilities of human action. It won’t even give us a reliable new way to raise money for worthwhile causes and projects. Such understanding of Kickstarter, crowdfunding, and the Digital Local will, however, present us with a new set of tools or technologies of meaning-making. And, just as understanding how the ways in which using tools like wrenches or automobiles can teach us about the motivations, needs, and affordances available to those who use them, understanding how persuasion occurs in this new digital medium can, in turn, reveal more about the ways in which we construct ourselves through the values (and valuables) of those around us – however “around” is defined at the moment.

As I have argued throughout this study, there is more to the local than the geographical; it is a place of joining for cooperation (or dispute) where, through these ongoing persuasive processes, we articulate and perform the actions that make up our lives. In helping us to choose how to spend our time, communities allow us to choose how we define ourselves. Kenneth Burke, in “Rhetoric, Poetics and Philosophy”, argues that the use of language is an essential characteristic of human identity, arguing that “symbolicity is a medium between man and the nonverbal, but by the same token, in being a medium, it separates him from the nonverbal realm” (27-28). The idea of “use” in the “symbol using animal” indicates that Burke views rhetoric as a tool whose function is to facilitate the process by which
people make meaning and induce cooperation. Rather than being composed of silicon and copper wires, however, this technology is made of words uttered (or written) within contextually driven situations.

If a technology is a tool facilitating action towards a purpose or goal, and, as Burke argues, rhetoric is the apparatus through which humanity induces cooperation amongst individual actors—themselves using language to construct and act out their own identities—it is not far-fetched to characterize technology as the tools through which we construct our communities, which, in turn, are the tools through which we “design” ourselves. Different technological modalities, then, are variants—remixes, or reversionings—of this basic design, the affordances and opportunities made available changing in important ways with each new remediation. This is, essentially, the rhetorical situation as characterized by Burke: Just as technology changes what is possible in science—which in turn changes what is possible in technology—rhetoric creates situations for itself. New contexts emerge from the needs created by the older contexts, all of which are tools designed to induce cooperation among the “users”. Rhetoric is a self-sustaining, systemic mechanism, or, as Burke characterizes it, an ongoing conversation into which each of us is arriving, and which will continue after we depart.

Crowdfunding represents just one remediation of this eternal “place” of rhetoric, but it is nevertheless one deserving of consideration as a modality unto itself rather than as a mere subordinate of the Internet as a whole. For while it does utilize the affordances, values, and assumptions of the digital, such characteristics are facilitated by, but not exclusive to, the medium. The idea of community is, at the core, one rooted in collaborative labor; as a member or group within the community shows need, ideally, the larger community as a whole will be driven by its shared values, ideologies, and discourses to enact whatever symbolic analytic work can best help to solve the problem. Similarly, notions of expertise, authorship, and authority serve as the means by which communities divide up this labor process, representing (in ideal circumstances) an equitable exchange of power based on need,
circumstance, and collaborative ability. Authorship, power, and authority, thus, are themselves technologies of persuasive meaning making. In Crowdfunding, we see that the local and the Digital Local share these traits; the authority of a project’s designer is one rooted in the author’s ability to create the discursive texts of a community. The means to enact this labor – the funding, in this case – is left to the community at large to donate or withhold based on that author’s ability to persuasively perform the two roles of both expert creative worker and interested, intrinsically motivated member of the community to which he or she is appealing. In seeing how this process unfolds time and again in crowdfunding, we may also see how, although using different affordances, it unfolds in other modalities and discourse communities.

This holds true for the classroom, the university, or, indeed, the rhetorical situation itself. So long as language – itself a technology – has existed, this interplay of modality, discourses, valuation, authority, expertise, and remediation has played out. Even Aristotle’s “available means of persuasion”, after all, are no more or less technological than any other machine. The broader goal of persuasion is to create rhetorical situations which direct the ongoing evolution of social contexts and material needs within society. Which means are available, too, is dictated by the available technologies of persuasion as well as the situation in which interlocutors find themselves. Rhetoric creates “place”, and technology – both modern and ancient – uses these established “places” to facilitate persuasive communication. Orality itself was the earliest form of this rhetorical technology, but as the practices were codified they also evolved, introducing other means of transmitting ideas and creating rhetorical situations in more distant spaces and times. The affordances allowed by the various ways in which ideas were transmitted altered the ideas themselves. Even in the ancient world, the technology of writing, first seen as a craftsman’s trade, gradually transformed into something valued as worthwhile due to its growing complexity and availability (Enos, 33-35). Now, in modern times, we see a similar sequence of events playing out in the Digital Local, where the technologies of meaning-making and valuation like
fundraising, publication, and distribution – once so obtuse and inaccessible to all but the strategic power structures of business and government, are now being given a new set of affordances which, although imperfectly so, aspire towards transparency, availability, and remixing. In each prototypical sample examined in this study, we saw, time and again, how successful persuasive action on crowdfunding relied on the author’s ability to understand – and then perform – the idea of “expertise” itself as a technology.

Whether a video game, a device, a scholarly publication, or a remediation of an older text, the project itself did not matter to audiences as much as the author’s ability to show the project would work as a text for the creation of meaning that is valued by the audience. And, as the contrasting examples of Inafune’s Red Ash and Zack Brown’s potato salad showed, the affordances of the internet and of crowdfunding are not merely technical considerations but value-laden rhetorical actions unto themselves, which even the most reputable interlocutor ignores at his or her own peril. Because of the transparency, availability, and possibilities for tactical remixing afforded by the digital, we are now in a unique position to view these technologies and their uses as such uses unfold, and, through this process of transparent, collaborative study, delve deeper into the previous “versions” of persuasion as a technology unto itself. In short, to understand newer technologies of persuasion – what they allow us to do, how they allow (or restrict) our doing it, and, as this study has concerned itself with, the motivations and considerations interlocutors consider when deciding whether or not to participate – is to learn new things about the older ones, and vice versa.

The study of crowdfunding – and by extension the Digital Local – is, therefore, not a matter of studying a technology through the lens of Rhetoric as a discipline, but using Crowdfunding as a complex, ever-evolving, and, because of the fast-paced and transparent nature of the genre itself, an imminently valuable and measurable example through which we may gain insights into the very foundations of
Rhetoric itself. Crowdfunding has its uses, certainly; whether to fund an artifact, bring the discourses of the academy to wider communities, make a work of art for a community that has fallen out of the mainstream, funding surgery for a stray kitten, or even as a tool for teaching composition to students from a diverse array of backgrounds and disciplines. However, these functions are all secondary to its true value, one that runs far deeper than the “extreme usability” which thinking only along the lines of monetary utility leads to. It is a tool for the creation of place, and through place, community, and through community authorship and interlocution. As we observe the discourses of crowdfunding, and the ways in which audiences give their voice to the values of their communities through the symbolic-analytic labor of donating, participating, collaborating, and even creating their own projects after being inspired by others’ success, we may learn the values not just how people do so through the “Digital”, but how people construct the “Local.”


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