

## *Teleprompting Élekcriture*

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*by Cynthia Haynes and Jan Rune Holmevik*

Writing is a physical effort . . . . One runs the race with the horse, that is to say, with the thinking in its production. It is not an expressed, mathematical thinking, it's a trail of images. And after all, writing is only the scribe who comes after, and who has an interest in going as fast as possible.

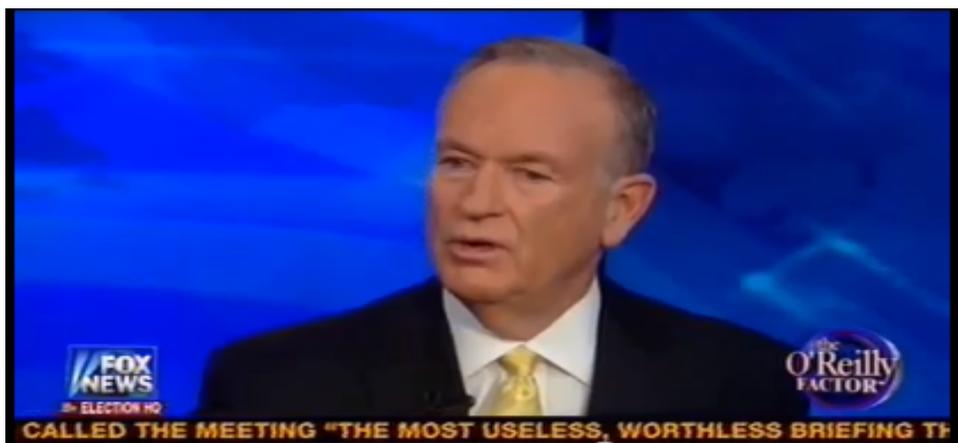
Hélène Cixous

## CyberText Yearbook 2013

It is 1994. You see a command-line interface. A `c>` prompt invites you to log in to this essay's directory. It is now 2013. A prompt indicates your Google glasses are ready to receive input. What a difference 20 years makes? Not so much. The directory for this collection of essays is accessed through the *CyberText Yearbook Database*, but the thought contained therein is not unlike what will have been (in the Nietzschean mode of the future perfect) a scrolling text readable on devices like virtual reality headsets, the progenitor of today's Google glasses. Such devices are not so much an innovation in reading as a *reading* of innovation. Similarly, this collection is not so much a curated set of texts (or the preservation of conservative reading protocols) as they are texts that insist on a proto-curation: typo(-il)logically prototypical. We could use a more simple framework and just announce a *redux* of *High Wired: On the Design, Use, and Theory of Educational MOOs* (1998). The prompts for reading this directory of our collective *redux* are **Movement** (Haynes and Holmevik), **Justice** (Vitanza), **Grammar** (Butts), **Web** (Kuhn), **Trauma** (Sirc), and **Reason** (Ulmer). Or, if you prefer, we can regress even further and sit in the wings of an Elizabethan theatre and serve as prompters (book-holders) cueing the actors in this six-act play. Perhaps it will be kinder on our readers to set up a virtual teleprompter that gets things moving.

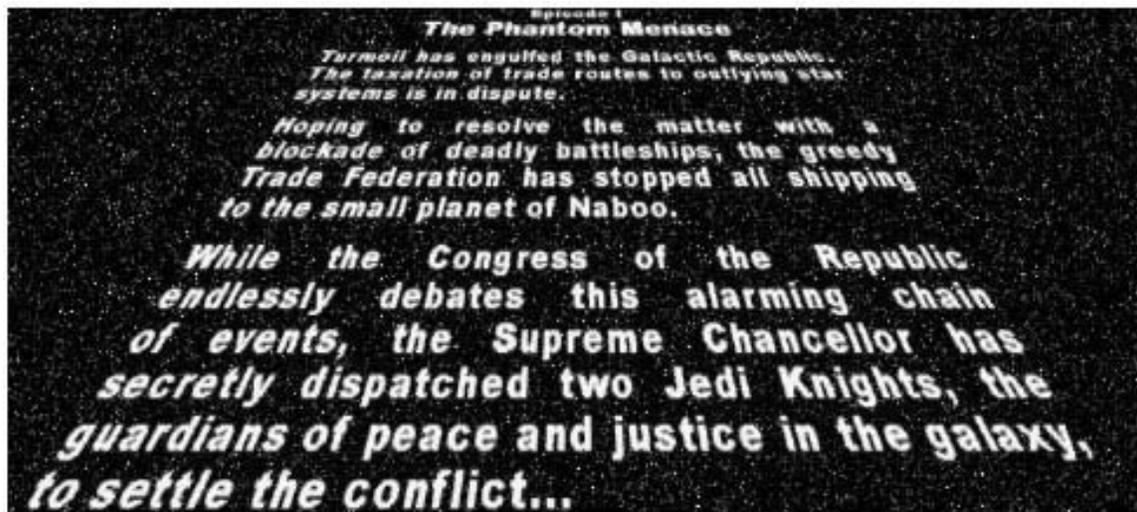
*Cynthia whispers: "Cue 'Teleprompting Élekcriture'"*

The teleprompter has become as ubiquitous in politics as it has in entertainment, creating an historical convergence of reading protocols that depend on machine and movement. Teleprompted discourse is especially critical for politicians who must simulate their oratory skills, and who need to appeal/appear as if they are simultaneously informal and improvising. Such ethos is emblematic of Plato's concern that writing would merely equip us with the 'semblance' of truth; "Once a thing is put in writing, it rolls about all over the place" (*Phaedrus*). So, too, the 24-hour news cycle (by some accounts less journalism than entertainment) situates the teleprompter both in front of the individual who 'reads' to viewers from a vertical syntagmatic streaming text, then reversed toward viewers and placed along the bottom of the screen in a horizontal paradigmatic text scroll that anticipates the next 'story' or recaps previous stories.



FOX News ticker

There is something primitive (intuitive) about the way words appear.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, there is something frightening (exhausting) about the way they dis/appear—scrolling upward with alarming speed, with the momentum of history, at the behest of time. In between, we inhabit the scroll bars, the space where movement and moment embrace. We witness language in action, in the languid flow of thought, the lurch of long-winded fragments, and the staccato bursts of out/landish play. We bid farewell to words with each keystroke, watching as they dwindle and fade from view. Imbuing them with invisible protection, we whisper, “may the force be with you.” We imagine them on their way—they travel as image.



Star Wars: Episode 1, The Phantom Menace© opening text crawl

Who can forget the opening scene of Star Wars, the text marching into the infinite universe of the Galactic Republic. This filmic device tapped into our cultural experiences of moveable type, such as ticker-tape, cinema marquees, follow the bouncing ball sing-alongs, and vintage newsreel footage.<sup>2</sup> It joined forces with a simple premise—moving text transforms thought into image and image into memory. It is perhaps uncharacteristic to claim that moving words stay with us longer. But we are interested in the un-character that un-does static print—that imagines us caught in a thicket of the thickest thieves: language and motion.

There is, however, a crucial caveat, or noise, in this system: the material action of writing sets language into motion, whether by programming or raw physicality. Composition happens, to riff on Geoffrey Sirc and Jacques Derrida. And, as it happens, language speaks us and re-members us at the same time (in the same moment). By some accounts, a focus on writing and motion must start by studying the parts of writing we see, such as letters, words, i.e. printed static texts. John Trimbur argues that “studying and teaching typography as the culturally salient means of producing writing can help locate composers in the labor process and thereby contribute to the larger post-process work of rematerializing literacy” (192). As “the turn-of-the-century Austrian architect and graphic designer Alfred Loos put it so concisely, ‘One cannot speak a capital letter’”

(191; qtd in Helfand 50). But Trimbur is narrowly focused on the typographical conventions that “[enable] us to see writing in material terms as letter-forms, printed pages, posters, computer screens” (192), while we are adjusting the focus to capture the images of writing in motion and the momentum that accrues in the backwash of memory. Through the many years we worked in MOOs, we came to understand such synchronous virtual space as a primary location of writing as images in motion. In other words, the appearance and disappearance of language inside a screen, the limits of which were beyond our vision, turned the scrollbar into a memory pole where words unfurl in the prevailing and transient winds of writing’s warp-speed momentum. Typography became biography—the life-world of writing on the fly.

Though the following exchange occurred in real time on October 9, 1999, it gives readers a sense of what we mean by ‘writing on the fly.’ William Gibson (author of the novel *Neuromancer*) logged in to Lingua MOO as part of a *trAce Writing Community* event in the U.K. We only had 30 minutes notice that he was logging in, so we hastily put out the word to Lingua users. He conversed with players in the MOO and created a ‘battered suitcase’ object into which you could place whatever MOO object you wanted. This is an excerpt of the MOO log that day:

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Helen says, "Bill's here"
snapdragon waves at Bill_Gibson.
Jan waves at Bill_Gibson.
Bill_Gibson says, "Hello, this really is Wm. Gibson, tho you
won't believe me..."
Cynthia [to Bill_Gibson]: We're honored to have you here at
Lingua MOO!
Tzen nods.
traci says, "we're likely to believe just about anything"
You laugh at traci.
Mark Cole says, "Hi Bill. Enjoyed the talk downstairs. Any advice
for a budding writer of speculative fiction (don't u hate
labels?)"
Bill_Gibson says, "Thanks. This is the very last gig on my
lightning UK All Tommorrow's Parties tour."
Helen says, "How would a beginner get that ball of elastic bands
going? (Bill's metaphor for writing a novel)"
Helen says, "Anyone want me to buy them a signed book?"
Tzen says, "Which book is it?"
Nolan . o O ( and pay for it? whoohooo. )
Bill_Gibson says, "Heinlein's advice: write, finish what you
write, submit it, submit again when it's rejected."
Jan smiles.
Helen says, "All Tomorrow's Worlds"
You take Neuromancer.
Mark Cole says, "Thanks... have a jelly bean"
You hand Neuromancer to Bill_Gibson.
Helen says, "Good advice Bill ;-)"
Tzen says, "ah."
Cynthia [to Bill_Gibson]: yes, would you virtually sign my
virtual copy of your book? :)
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William Gibson interacting with Lingua MOO users (Oct 9, 1999)

The MOO, as locus and instrument of linguistic register and re-collection, circum/scribes this composite image of writing and memory. Bruce Gronbeck reminds us that Aristotle makes a clear distinction between memory and recollection and tallies the attributes of recollection in his treatise *De Memoria*, “Recalling is always a matter of reconstructing ‘movement’ or sequences of action” (140; McKeon 451b-453a). For Aristotle, memory stems from recollection as such: “For remembering [which is the *condicio sine qua non* of recollecting] is the existence, potentially, in the mind of a movement capable of stimulating it to the desired movement, and this, as has been said, in such a way that the person should be moved [prompted to recollection] from within himself, i.e. in consequence of movements wholly contained within himself” (McKeon 452a).

Thus, early on our knowledge of how memory works is derived from Aristotle’s notion of motion contained. In her essay, “Habit as Memory Incarnate,” Marion Joan Francoz explains the containment model, the hydraulic model, and the physiological models of memory, advocating the latter and its association with habit. According to Francoz, “‘Image schemata,’ which Lakoff and Johnson propose as dynamic alternatives to abstract schematic representations in memory, find their most basic manifestation in the spatial aspect of the body, ‘from our experience of physical containment’ (Johnson, *Body 21*)” (14).

But the movement we have in mind must also be a movement that is enduring, that gains momentum from the start, that keeps going. Viewed in this way, writing becomes a force, as Cixous writes, with which we contend and by which we leave our own trail of images. The trajectory of this essay follows three moments, or movements, along the trail of images we have left like bread crumbs for ‘the scribe that follows after’ and has somehow re-forged the relation between writing as image and learning via text in motion.

## CyberText Yearbook 2013

\*\*\* Connected \*\*\*

Cynthia's Office

Comfortable office where Cyndia meets friends and works on various projects. On the walls she has various Southwestern paintings and objects. Scattered among the books and bookcases are various plants like cactus and lamps for mood lighting. Cyndia likes to work surrounded by things that reflect her taste and interests.

Obvious exits: down to House of Blues

You see Macintosh, TV, VCR, Tape1, Cam, Paloma the Cat, and Yellow Rose here.

Last connected Mon May 9 12:33:40 2011 CDT from 72.147.59.25

There's a new edition of the newspaper. Type 'news' to see it.

@go MediaMOO TV Studio

MediaMOO TV Studio

WELCOME to the MMTV Studio. If there's any equipment you need just 'activate Robbie' and ask him for it!

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-----| N |-----
|       |   |   |   |   | |
|       |   | TVs | VCRs | TAPES | CAMERAS |
|       |   | SLIDE PROJECTORS |
|       |   | CONVERSATIONAL BOTS |
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| Tape Editing Room | W |   | << MMTV STUDIO >> |
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|       |   | Tape Library | | ( ) ROBBIE |
|       |   |   |   |   |   |
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Obvious exits: west to Tape Editing Room and N to West Media Ave.

You see Broadcaster, VAX 11/780, Robbie, broadcast monitor, Tape Library, MediaMOO TV Helicopter, drugz, 10thMOOiversary, and tv here.

Jan is here.

Robbie says, "[to Cyn] I like mediaMOO a lot, its fun to explore and learn new things."

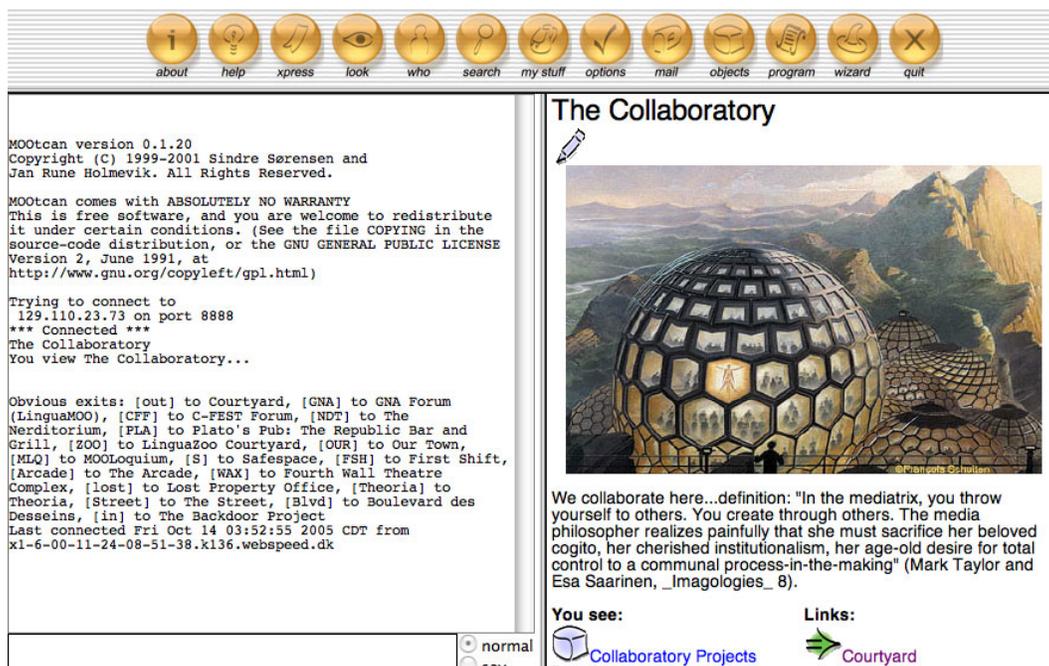
□

MediaMOO MMTV Studio (May 9, 2011; 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our meeting on May 9, 1994)

In 1994, when we first met in the text-based virtual community, MediaMOO, we quickly understood the power of writing in motion. The MOO is a blend of text and image, and of orality and literacy. Oral insofar as the interaction among writer/speakers in the MOO reproduces oral conversation via written text, literate insofar as the writing requires fluency to produce meaning. The interesting, and innovative, aspect of this phenomenon is that in the MOO tightening (and blurring) the orality/literacy split is achieved visually. Within months we created our own community using the LambdaMOO database, and within two years of creating Lingua MOO we had published our collection of essays, *High Wired* (University of Michigan Press), following which we created a graphical web-based interface called enCore Xpress, and soon thereafter, the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *High Wired*. Our task in the introduction to *High Wired* was, we believed, to articulate (insofar as we could) a new name for such writing. We coined the term *élektriture*, borrowing from the Greek for the beaming sun (Elektra) and French feminism's notion of writing (*l'écriture féminine*), to describe a thematic conjunction between electricity and the streams of writing that spill forth in a discourse that resists traditional ways of organizing and controlling the flow of conversation.

And even after we combined the textual and graphical registers of meaning-production with a graphical interface that split the text side and the graphical side,

*élektriture* still dominated the production of meaning. Rhetorically, the design allowed for style to enhance input and for an intertextual-graphical interface to border the space in which learning takes place, while the web-based interface also made many MOO functions easier to learn and execute. But the fact that graphical MOO interfaces such as enCore Xpress had helped move MOO technology along at a pace in concert with other web-based communication software in the late 90s is not central to the idea we are promoting of text as image; we considered it merely a bonus.



LinguaMOO graphical interface, enCore Xpress (2005)

Nineteen years ago we got to know one another in language, in real-time. It was both a ‘home’ we could share and one we built for others to enter and build as they saw fit. We were living/writing *in a visible* text. The question of writing became a manifestation of personal and professional discourses, the crossing of which became for us an *invisible* boundary—we did not distinguish between the space of our belonging to one another and to our academic others. It is akin to Bruno Latour’s reminder that “in the eyes of our critics the ozone hole above our heads, the moral law in our hearts, the autonomous text, may each be of interest, but only separately. That a delicate shuttle should have woven together the heavens, industry, texts, souls and moral law -- this remains uncanny, unthinkable, unseemly” (5).

The second moment is really a fast forward ten years when MOOs began to wane as the graduate students who created, administered, and populated them moved on to “real” lives and jobs, and we found other platforms where writing in motion served as our template for play and purpose: Neverwinter Nights, Diablo II, Second Life, and World of Warcraft.

Yet, in citing our own experiences we are somewhat torn. On the one hand, we believe the durability of these texts in motion seals the sagacity of our argument (not to mention the reality of our lives, which is hardly virtual any longer, though we tend not to make that distinction). On the other hand, as rhetoricians we understand the need for a critical eye. Roland Barthes expressed it in this manner: "...my desire to write on Photography corresponded to a discomfort I had always suffered from: the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical; and at the heart of this critical language, between several discourses, those of sociology, of semiology, and of psychoanalysis..." (*Camera* 8). This is how we approach writing about writing *in visible* texts; like Barthes, we are both "Operator" and "Spectator" (9). "The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive" (6).

Barthes is instructive in an additional sense—as purveyor of the line between forms of visibility. In the static (print or web) iteration of this history, we understand that we cannot de/pict the motion of text we are de/scribing here. Even a "still" image (i.e., screenshot) of some MOO tran/script does not do justice to the movement experienced as graphé/flux (the flux of moving writing). But we can work with the concept of the photo/graph as theorized by Barthes because he re-animates it in order to ponder our pandemic belief in the invisibility of its animation of us. "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see" (6). "In this glum desert, suddenly a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it. So that is how I must name the attraction which makes it exist: an animation. The photograph itself is in no way animated (I do not believe in 'lifelike' photographs), but it animates me: this is what creates every adventure" (20).

There is, then, something that wants animating, that reveals itself when time and motion call certain features of text into the unconcealedness of typorganisms—of writing on the move. Barthes meets Martin Heidegger at this juncture, redefining the 'origin of the work of art,' following the workness until we can see it at work. What Heidegger saw in a pair of worn out peasant shoes, Barthes sees in the instruments of time and photography: "For me the noise of Time is not sad: I love bells, clocks, watches—and I recall that at first the photographic implements were related to techniques of cabinetmaking and the machinery of precision: cameras, in short, were clocks for seeing, and perhaps in me someone very old still hears in the photographic mechanism the living sound of the wood" (15). The third moment along the trail of images comes into view now. Are MOOs and World of Warcraft like clocks for seeing writing? What happens in the *seeing* of composition as it happens?

It is time—time that moves into a new topos where momentum gathers itself unto itself, where (it turns out) moments are re-turned to time. Who are we to think we owned them in the first place? We are so bound up in our sense of sovereign subjectivity that we dare to preface topos with its own 'u'—unbounded topos—utopia. But in so doing, we have managed to create every dystopia known to humanity. MOOs and WoW are, thankfully, no utopias; they are more along the lines of what Alok Nandi calls a fluxtopia. According to Nandi: "Virtu/RE/alities explore the gap between virtuals, ideals and realities. Fluxtopia can only be understood in the act of attempting to achieve the traject

of any flow. But how do we achieve what we mean by it if we do not know what it is, except that IT is in constant mutation, flowing apart?" (np). Nandi exploits our collective delusion that we can capture the flow of media by setting up various fluxtopic passages designed to foreground both delusion and passage. MOOs and WoW are portals into this "fluxography"; or, as Geoff Sirc might call it, this "fluxus-inflected practice" ("Fluxjoke" 3). The key to understanding how momentum assists memory rests not on the rests, or pauses, we inject in writing and reading, rather in the *in/visible* border between delusion and passage, one that is (hopefully) not subject to Aristotelian or Platonic border patrols. In synchronous writing environments we are lulled, by the momentum of language, into no complacent region of learning, but an active accumulation of meaning we commonly think of as memory. The movement of language, its marching momentum, lulls us into thinking we are pushing things along, when it is more accurate to say we are being pulled into a remembering machine without being aware of it. The question is how does momentum and language do this. And here we issue a patch to our earlier thinking on this topic by adding a small "t" to *élekcriture*—*télekcriture*. To underscore how *télekcriture* accomplishes this lulling, we should sample the most basic qualities of flux: rhetoric, rhythm, and reciprocity.

As a rhetorical machine, *télekcriture* mixes language, writers, and distance, then reconfigures them as sustained contextual real-time interactivity. But distance itself also figures within language. Barthes suggests, as have others over the years, that all language is rhetorical, that is, it is highly figurative. There are countless ways we attempt to maintain the distinction between two dimensions of language, the literal and figurative; but in the end, language is all figurative (*Semiotic* 82-93). In short, Barthes argues, "the meta-rhetorical expressions which attest to this belief are countless. . . . Aristotle sees in it a taste for alienation: one must 'distance oneself from ordinary locutions . . . : we feel in this respect the same impressions as in the presence of strangers or foreigners: style is to be given a foreign air, for what comes from far away excites admiration'" (88). There is, then, in language itself a dimension of distance, a sense in which words travel across time and distance in order to 'mean' something in the here and now. Words exhibit the wear and tear of distance and time, and no amount of anti-rhetorical rhetoric can undermine this fact. But critics like Paul Virilio misdirect their fears at teletechnologies (like MOOs and WoW) in an effort to restore to language (and thus to ourselves) a degree of nearness and sovereignty that seems to have slipped away (when it was never ours to begin with). As Virilio argues, "[b]etween the subjective and objective it seems we have no room for the 'trajective,' that being of movement from here to there, from one to the other, without which we will never achieve a profound understanding of the various regimes of perception of the world that have succeeded each other throughout the ages" (24). In short, he laments the "loss of the traveller's tale" (25), he longs for the "essence of the path, the journey" (23).

Whereas Nandi's fluxtopia situates the trajective within the work (i.e., the act) of writing, Virilio situates it in the achievement of writing—the having travelled along a path. This is precisely the tension at work in the difference between print and electronic texts, something we think Richard Lanham missed in *The Electronic Word*, but not something Michael Joyce missed. In attempting to articulate the pulse of Carolyn Guyer's phrase "tensional momentum," Joyce finds evidence of a missing rhythm—a rhythm not

present, literally, in print texts. But he's torn, too. "And yet I know, in the way someone watches water slip through sand, that words are being displaced by image in those places where we spend our time online; know as well that images, especially moving ones, have long had their own syntax of the preliminary and the inevitable" (314).

Writing in visible texts, like sand and water, flows at a rhythmic (ragged or silken) pace. In the exchange of languaging beings typing along this tempo-trajectory, reciprocity arises. It is woven by the 'delicate shuttle' of an/other interaction—sustained contextual real-time reciprocal interactivity. Reciprocal interaction partakes of a fluidity of movement related to (and determined by) tides and time. The backward (re-) and forward (-pro) movement of the tides, the ebbing and flowing of Oceanus in Homer's *Iliad*, lends its sense of fluid and cyclic language to real-time reciprocity. It is constant, continuing without intermission, steadily present, the constancy of real-time. Writing resists slowing down; it has its own force of forward movement. In digital environments such as MOOs and WoW, this momentum rushes ahead of us and we are merely the scribes following after, somewhat engulfed by/in visible texts and set in motion by our words—in their current—on their way.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the past thirteen years or so since our collection *High Wired: On the Design, Use, and Theory of Educational MOOs* (University of Michigan Press, 1998; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2001) appeared, we have presented at numerous conferences, conducted workshops, and written essays on MOOs. We want to thank Markku Eskelinen and Raine Koskimaa for inviting us to publish this *High Wired 'redux,'* which folds in an earlier version of the essay by Cynthia Haynes ("In Visible Texts: Memory, MOOs, and Momentum") with talks given by Jan Holmevik and Cynthia Haynes at the Computers and Writing Conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan (2011). Victor J. Vitanza also presented on that panel; and thus the idea for this collection was conceived.

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting example of vintage newsreel, bouncing ball singalong, and scrolling text, see this montage of Jill Sobule's "Resistance Song": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyUk1tv6CUU>.

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