Melanie Yergeau interviewed by Anne Wysocki

Anne Wysocki
I'm curious to hear how you respond. So, whichever one comes to mind. You know, the first one is, How is your webtext innovative in the historical and/or material technological contexts within which it was created? Go!

Melanie Yergeau
[LAUGHS] So... let's see... I guess, maybe I can start with the collaborative one, the Expanding the Space of Face-to-Face with Pete Vandenberg and Katie Wozniak. I don't know how to think about it in terms of innovation. I think what was maybe unique about it at the time may have more to do with it being a piece of writing center scholarship. Just in terms of... DePaul was doing some really cool, innovative stuff with audio-visual conferencing because DePaul has two main campuses in Chicago, and they're both a few miles apart, but then there are also several satellite campuses. So, I started there as a Master's student, and pretty much right when I started there, they were just beginning to pilot these programs because we had writing centers on the two main campuses, but not in any of the suburban campuses. So we had to figure out a way to be able to serve students who wanted to work with the writing center but weren't about to make the however long commute down into Lincoln Park or the Loop. So we set up webcams in some of the libraries at those campuses and tried piloting a program. That, I guess, was my second year in the program, that's when we actually started working on more of the scholarly side of things, and trying to record those conversations. Actually, what we just went through, trying to record this conversation... it was like that!

[CROSS-TALK]

Anne Wysocki
Right, yeah. Only six years ago must have been much worse. Yeah.

Melanie Yergeau
[LAUGHS] It was because... not only was it difficult to find a program to conduct the tutorials in at the time, because when I started at DePaul, it was 2005, and by the time we were actually trying to do this on a larger scale and study it, it was 2006. So, I mean, Skype existed, but it wasn't great. And we didn't really have, you know... It wasn't an option for us to use the paid, proprietary kind of tutoring systems that Adobe had at the time, or I think Macromedia. [LAUGHS]

Anne Wysocki
Right. I remember them!

Melanie Yergeau
There weren't terribly many options. We ended up using a program...I'm not even sure if it exists any more, called SightSpeed. Because at the time, anyway, that allowed us to do remote desktop kinds of stuff. So, if we were talking with a writer

and they wanted to actually show us the Word document, or show us something physically that they were doing and not hold it up to the camera, but something that lived on their screen, we were able to do that. So there was that for us, and also it was a free program. So it was just so much trial and error. I feel like that whole aspect is just a whole world in itself in terms of what we had to do. The other issue that we had was the screen recording, and we ended up using Camtasia for that. At first it was just using the trial version, but then we were able to locate the funding to have stuff on computers at both the writing centers but also in the suburban campus library. We ended up recording a number of sessions. And it was hard to find participants, just because... I think it's a challenge to do that kind of... it felt so new to people at the time. It feels weird saying that, but it did feel very new for students, and especially people who worked at the writing center to be doing that, and then recording it as another layer was a whole issue unto itself. Yeah. But when I looked at the webtext this morning, and I don't know if it's my browser, but the video embeds aren't working. So it could be my browser, or it could just be the way that we embedded the QuickTime videos at the time no longer works. So even that's kind of funny to me that it's broken a little bit now. But what was really, I think, useful about that, for just in terms of writing center studies, was thinking about all of the issues that go into trying to create this kind of tutorial system. And it just brought up multiple access issues, because... you know, it creates... In some ways, having these systems creates accessibility, because for us, anyway, it was totally unrealistic to expect students to travel two hours to come into the writing center. So we really needed that particular system. But then, you know, it's also hard to get people to use that particular system. Even thinking about all the things that can go wrong with technology, but also then thinking about modality, disability, like... There are so many different things. So we sort of ended that project by saying, Here's what we did, but we're not necessarily recommending it. We can't give wholesale recommendations. It's more like, we can talk through the process, and it's something that, you know, the optimism surrounding these kinds of tutoring technologies really needs to be checked. Because I think, for me, because I was such a young graduate student at the time, I had this sort of unbridled technological optimism going on. Like, yes, shiny cameras. But by the end I was like, No! No more! I never want to see a camera again.

Anne Wysocki
Well, how did you make the decision when you all decided that you wanted to publish about what you had done, to do it in the way that you did? So that it ended up as a webtext? I mean, I'm assuming it was more than just, Hey we can show some of the video. Although that I'm sure was probably part of it, but...

Melanie Yergeau
Yeah. That was part of it. But I think you're right. The "here's the video" was a very tiny part of it. I think it happened over several conversations because it started out, you know, in the sense that... Katie Wozniak and I were graduate assistants at DePaul, and so we wanted... so we were doing this as part of our employment, but also as part of an independent study we were taking with Pete. And, at least for me, I

had started the Master's program at DePaul unsure of what I wanted to do afterward. At the time when I started, I was thinking of it as a stepping-stone to an MFA program. I wanted to do creative writing. And by my second year, it had transitioned to being a rhetoric and composition program for me. I mean, that I wanted to pursue a PhD. So, I think I had my own progression along those lines, and I think something similar was happening for Katie, where eventually we both kind of had some shifts just in terms of thinking what we would do. The appeal of rhetoric and composition to me was the digital aspect to it. In part because, as an undergrad, I started out as a computer science major. And I dropped, my second year, just because the program I was in, it was just so male-dominated...

[CROSS-TALK]
Anne Wysocki
I've never heard that before.

[LAUGHTER]
Melanie Yergeau
I did not at all... I just... I was one of maybe like five women in the program. It was just...It didn't feel like a disciplinary home to me. So in some ways, I think rhet-comp provided an avenue for me to return to things that I really had loved but had set aside because I just couldn't deal with that particular program. I think, for us, it gave us an opportunity to really think through the field, but also, I think that, at least for me, it's just the way I think, on some level. I think there were certain affordances to having the structure of a webtext, beyond the video, that might not have happened on the page. There's a certain visuality to it. We were really thinking long and hard about the visual metaphor or the interface for it. We used Flash for that cover page, and Katie and I walked over to the dorms, talked to a couple of first-year students, who said, "Yeah, you can photograph our dorm room!"

[CROSS-TALK]
Melanie Yergeau
So that's what we did...

Anne Wysocki
Yeah, I was wondering.

Melanie Yergeau
These people we had just met, we were photographing their dorm. And that ended up being the cover image. For us, I think, space was a really huge component of that particular study. And especially because of the tutorials we had recorded and conducted... there were always these moments where... Sometimes we'd become really engrossed in the conversation, and you would forget. It was brutally evident that this is what was happening. So, like, someone's doorbell would ring, or they would get up and walk away, and bring back a bag of Cheetos, or something. So there was something really domestic about it. And it was very different from a regular tutorial. So, that's a long-winded answer.

Anne Wysocki

It makes me curious, though, because what I've been thinking about is, I've been reflecting on my piece, and realizing that it's like twelve, thirteen years ago. And thinking about affordances of then and one of the things that's stuck out for me in that piece, and you just talked about, is how, in these writing center conferences, that they were talking with other people online. And yet, the piece itself talks about that, but doesn't feel very domestic, and doesn't feel that way, you know? So there's still a lot of the academic arrangement to your piece. There's that opening picture that you've talked about, of the dorm room, and that sets up a really nice tone, but that's not carried through the rest of it. And I'm assuming that has to do with CRAP, you know, there's not much we can do with this, given constraints on time, and sound, and stuff. So it makes me wonder, you know, if you were to redo that piece now, given what you know and given what you can do, if you would try to change the arrangement or redesign it generally... If you were to do it now, given what's possible.

Melanie Yergeau

I think I would do it very differently if I did it now. I mean... Some of it has to do, I think, with thinking through the visual metaphor, the way people would engage with the text. But also some of it is more pragmatic issues, like I think... I've come to somewhat despise the pop-up design, where you click on something and then it's a page pop-up. At the time, I think that was kind of the rage, like it was the cool, hip thing to do. So, I think there's that. There's also the element of user control that I think isn't as much there in terms of, you know, what happens when you resize a page. Nothing good, with that current design. The videos are very tiny, when they do show up.

[CROSS-TALK]

Anne Wysocki

Because they had to be back then.

Melanie Yergeau

We didn't do closed captioning, in part because the videos were so small, that the captions would have taken over the video. And we didn't really have the option... you know... YouTube now, or Vimeo, they have great captioning options. But that wasn't really available to us at the time we created it. So I think there's that rethinking element. But there's also, I think... We had started off with the dorm room, but the dorm room wasn't the only space in which these kinds of moments or conversations happened. So, some people were at work talking with us, like at the office, which we didn't really have accounted in that particular piece. And there were a number of people who were either at a suburban campus, or were even at the Loop campus. So, talking Lincoln Park to Loop or Loop to Lincoln Park, and vice versa. So, there still was... there was a campus feel, but a different kind of campus feel than having two people in the same room. So, I think for me, we might have

carried out the spatial metaphor, but perhaps made it so that the section felt like you were living in a given room or space. And that there would be different spaces. But I think also there's something to play with in terms of sound that we didn't really do, because in further reflection, some of the things that would happen is... because you're talking with someone virtually, they're either talking too loud or too softly. Like, they've got people around them, so it's like this very hush conversation. Or, you know, they think that you can't hear them, so they're basically screaming into the webcam, so like those kinds of dissonant moments, I think, if there were some way to better represent them in the lived experience of the webtext. i think that would probably be the move we would make with it.

Anne Wysocki
Wow, cool. Yeah. And that brings up the next question that you all sent us, which is the one about curation, too. I mean that's been hovering behind… You know, you're talking about how the sound or the video doesn't work now. So how do you think about this piece continuing onto live where it is on *Kairos*? I mean, if it could be archived, in the best possible way, how would that look for you?

Melanie Yergeau
That's a good question. You know, I don't know. I would like to hear from Pete and Katie about this, in terms of what their thoughts are. I know I still have a lot of the original videos. So, the unedited stuff. Because the clips that we did have, when they were working in the webtext, were very short. So we were focused on specific moments. So, things like people laughing, or someone getting up from the table, walking over, and answering the door and coming back. How to use non-directive strategies via webcam tutorial. It's a bit more difficult to have those kinds of conversations. You know, I don't know if it would make sense to have some kind of archive of those clips that we had, but perhaps in somewhat of a higher resolution. Although, I don't know how high of a resolution we actually had, just because we were using Camtasia through webcams. But I imagine it would be better... So, I think that the video clips... should be stored in some kind of way, so that they're held onto. In terms of the other parts, I'm not sure how that would happen. I don't know what even the Flash splash page interface will look like in a few years because depending on the device you're using, it probably won't work. It won't be compatible at all. So there's the potential of losing that entry point into the text. So, in some ways... it brings up the question of, Do we just let it be? Because on a certain level... it would require [UNCLEAR] Or it would require a real flattening, where it's just the text and links to the video clips, which would be an entirely different experience of it.

Anne Wysocki
Yeah. It wouldn't be that original text. So, we're just going to have to find 2,000... with the text on it, right?

Melanie Yergeau
Yup.

Anne Wysocki
Yeah, we had a long discussion about this in a dissertation defense the other day, about this kind of degradation and the limiting of text. And it was a real interesting discussion because it was a defense about anxiety about bodies, given what's happening with books and the dissolving of books. So, it was hard to separate that discussion from how people are thinking about bodies. But, that's something else. So, we're coming close to the end of the 20-minute mark. So, the last question is, What are you working on now?

Melanie Yergeau
OK. So what am I working on now. Maybe I can invoke the other webtext here. So, right now I'm working on a book project and the book is print, which is really weird.

Anne Wysocki
Well, because you're not working on tenure, right?

Melanie Yergeau
[LAUGHS] I'm not. So, I'm doing that, and it has nothing to do with my dissertation, which was digital. But the book is on autism. And so it's interesting to kind of go back to that aut(hored)ism webtext, just because I think... It was interesting to me that it got published. It was some of my earlier thinking. And Cheryl Ball really helped me get that published. Because it has started out in a seminar, and I took it into DMAC. With the help of Cheryl, it went somewhere beyond DMAC. But I keep going back to it because it's interesting to me how stuff that I felt like I had dropped for a little while has suddenly resurfaced in different ways in the book project. I think for me, the book project had started out as trying to make a list of all the ways in which clinicians say shitty things about autism. [LAUGHTER] So looking at the horrible, horrible rhetorical maneuvers of clinicians. But it's really come back to this question of authoring in the sense of what do autistic people do, what do autistic activists do, what is an autistic rhetoric. And I think that, in some ways, that webtext plays at that in ways that I had forgotten, or maybe wasn't even consciously realizing I was doing when I had created it. So, things like... there's a whole section where I start out by saying, "These are the ways in which I'm not autistic." And then there's just, like, a blank page. And then the following pages have this list of things that are playing with the symptom clusters that are supposedly attached to it. So I've just been thinking about that a lot, you know. And thinking about how that kind of poetry manifests itself in autistic blogs, autistic embodiment, and other spaces. It's been really interesting to go back to that, and also to see how it's charted a kind of trajectory for what I'm working on now.

Anne Wysocki
But how do you... Because you're working on a print project.

Melanie Yergeau
Yes.

Anne Wysocki
So I'm curious how you think about the affordances of what you were able to do online or, you know, people who are autistic, their uses of video, and what's been happening on YouTube, people getting themselves to be seen and heard and claiming spaces. How that helps you think about print and vice versa. I mean, what the limitations are, how you see pushing against print to do what you need to do.

Melanie Yergeau
Yeah. So that's a really good question, and a hard one. Because I think, at first, when I realized that I would have to do a print project for my book... There was a sort of mourning period for me. Just because, I mean, disability activism is so richly multimodal. It's really hard to think of ways to account for that and honor that in print spaces. I think there's also a certain inaccessibility about print. But there's also a certain accessibility about print, too, that isn't necessarily present in multimodal spaces. It forced me to think more concretely, strategically, and pragmatically about voice, in terms of how I write. And also the accessibility or inaccessibility of voice. Because even though this is a project that ideally will enable me to have tenure, I'm still... Despite it having an academic audience, I'm still trying to find ways to conceptualize this beyond the academic, so that it would be the kind of text that other autistic people would read. And I think in some ways that's what marks the text as distinct, because most academic books about autism are authored by non-autistic people for non-autistic people. And I have no interest in doing that. So, there's a heavy narrativistic element to it. I mean, I would characterize it in many respects as being auto-ethnographic, or autie-ethnographic, which I think also... It's a long tradition, in terms of not only autistic activism but disability activism and disability writing writ large. So not only does it sort of carry on in that tradition, but I also think it builds upon it, too. So, I think for me, I mean, that's where the multimodal has helped me to think through the print, and vice versa. Thinking about voice, thinking about accessibility, thinking about audience in very nuanced, complicated kind of ways.

Anne Wysocki
Cool, ok. My head's bubbling with different kinds of ideas right now. Just, real quickly, do you know the book Summer of Her Baldness?

Melanie Yergeau
No, I don't.

Anne Wysocki
It's kind of a weird one to think of right now, but it's a woman who is at Irvine, a professor in English. And it's about her dealing with cancer treatments. And so it is, as print goes, sort of an experimental slash academic text. It was really, really rich for me in thinking about some of these things. I mean, I know you've got tons of resources from the angles you're coming at. But that was... Somebody showed me that book. In thinking about academic books that walk that academic line. Anyway. That was just the first thing that came to mind. So sorry.

Melanie Yergeau
No, that's great. I'm going to check that one out, actually.

Anne Wysocki
If I find other stuff, that's the first one that comes to mind. We've gone well over time. This has been really delightful.

Melanie Yergeau
Yes, and thank you!

Anne Wysocki
Yeah. And thanks for being patient with us figuring this out, and for having a solution. And my fingers are crossed that this has indeed worked, because I'm curious now about this machine actually having recorded a full half hour of full-screen video, you know, in any way that's useful. We've been trying this from both ends. So, I guess we'll hang up. I'll check on how the video looks and goes, and I'll get back to you. And, if you think about things you wanted to have said. I know that always happens after an interview, like, "Oh, damn!" [LAUGHTER] There was this! We could always... Now that I know how to do this, we could do this really easily. So, let's just check into that. But otherwise, have a lovely day. Good luck with all that writing.

Melanie Yergeau
Thank you!

Anne Wysocki
And I'll be seeing you.

Melanie Yergeau
Yes, sounds great. Bye!

Anne Wysocki
OK, Melanie. Bye!