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Dear Provost Everts:

In 1998, not yet knowing the protocol for enacting change on a university campus, I wrote a letter and mailed it to the president of Virginia Commonwealth University, where I was studying for my MFA in poetry. I requested him to consider implementing Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) in the graduate school because our in-state peers had already done so. (My hope was to get permission to compose a digital, interactive, multimedia-rich poetry thesis based on poetic and rhetorical theories of hypertext, and to have that work count under the ETD aegis.) To my surprise, he agreed and appointed me to an ETD Task Force, out of which I helped craft implementation standards and produced the first born-digital thesis at that school.

In the decade since, I have worked on similar scholarly and professional issues—having become editor of the leading digital media journal in rhetoric and composition studies; publishing in and editing books for digital-writing studies' first digital academic press; presenting local and national workshops on digital media scholarship; and helping to write guidelines on evaluating digital journals while serving on national committees. I bring this scholarly and professional work into the classroom by sharing my expertise in digital writing studies with undergraduates and graduates students, first, at Utah State, and, since 2007, at Illinois State University. In the last six years, I have learned to summarize my research and teaching agenda in one statement: digital media asks us to constantly re-evaluate what a *text* is, how it works, to whom it speaks, and why. These questions guide my research, teaching, and service.

While some of my work is traditional—that is, in print—much of my scholarly and creative work is born-digital and cannot be printed, nor can it exist outside of the World Wide Web (needing server technologies to work properly). Some examples of my scholarship that cannot be printed include “webtexts,” which are scholarly article-length digital texts that use multiple media to enact their arguments. Of one these webtexts, “A Conversation: From “They Call Me Doctor?!” to Tenure,” exemplifies how I use digital media to communicate scholarly concepts while collaborating with co-authors to mentor junior (and sometimes senior) scholars in digital writing studies. Additionally, “A Conversation” is published in an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal, showing my research commitment to push the boundaries of ‘what counts’ as scholarship while making those boundaries more negotiable to readers who may not recognize the value in digital media work (especially from a field within English Studies that typically values print and written texts).

In 2007, “A Conversation” was the finalist for the Best Webtext Award in digital writing studies; however, my experience and research tells me that not everyone is as generous to digital scholarship as the person who nominated my webtext for an award. As an Assistant Professor applying for tenure this academic year (2009–10), I would like to share some of my research questions about digital scholarship that drive my professional life, as a way to explain why I sought permission to pursue my tenure bid using an all-digital portfolio. (This time, I wrote you a version of this letter but did not send it, realizing that the chain of command worked differently than it did when I was an ignorant MFA student.) To get permission, my department chair, Joan Mullin, organized a meeting with College of Arts and Sciences Interim Dean Jim Payne and Associate Dean Sam Catanzaro in April 2009. At that meeting, I shared the following questions and concerns with them, just as I do now with you and my tenure readers.

## 1. How will tenure stakeholders read and evaluate (my) digital media work?

Scholarship in digital media considers form as powerful a meaning-making tool as content, and often the content isn't linguistic. As part of my research on digital scholarship, I have surveyed tenure readers at other schools who say that they don't recognize digital media scholarship *as* scholarship because they believe it lacks the same linguistic clues and conventions that print scholarship has (although my and others' research shows otherwise). Further, because tenure readers find digital media scholarship suspect in form, its peer-reviewed status (when published in online journals) is often overlooked and, thus, the work is dismissed in tenure cases. In my tenure portfolio, I have made it evident which articles and webtexts are peer-reviewed—all are labeled "Peer-Reviewed Articles," to keep consistent with the wording in the paper application.

Even with the peer-reviewed designation, however, I recognize that readers want to, but have difficulty, interpreting digital media texts, which the field also calls *new media scholarship*, *multimodal scholarship*, *born-digital scholarship*, *scholarly multimedia*, and so on (a new field still deciding on its terms...). All terms are essentially synonymous for the purposes of tenure review: scholarship that uses appropriate, multiple media—writing, audio, video, graphics, coding, etc.—to enact its argument and typically cannot be printed and retain its meaning. Because such scholarship uses unexpected media and genres, external reviewers become crucial to the tenure process for digital writing scholars<sup>1</sup>, and I am hopeful that my reviewers have addressed how such texts can be interpreted. As scholars in digital writing studies, we all draw on professional experiences composing, reading, and also editing digital texts, but we also draw on multiple sets of evaluation and assessment guidelines for work with technology and digital media. These guidelines include:

- Modern Language Association's Guidelines for Evaluating Work with Digital Media in the Modern Languages: [http://www.mla.org/guidelines\\_evaluation\\_digital](http://www.mla.org/guidelines_evaluation_digital)
- Conference on College Composition and Communication's Position Statement on Promotion and Tenure Guidelines for Work with Technology: <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/promotionandtenure>
- Council of Editors of Learned Journals' Best Practices for Online Journal Editors: <http://www.celj.org/files/downloads/CELJJournalEditorsGuidelines.pdf>
- Allison Warner's "Constructing a Tool for Assessing a Scholarly Webtext": <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/12.1/binder.html?topoi/warner/index.html>

Because the above represents a lot of additional reading (and, regrettably, the guidelines from professional organizations including MLA and CCCC are rather outdated towards digital media scholarship), I'll sum up the two main concepts that these guidelines suggest:

- **Read work in the medium in which it was meant**

Because much of my work requires a server to run properly, the online portfolio acts as a gateway to that work, keeping in mind that because these texts are "live" on the Internet, you may occasionally experience technical glitches such as a down server, a missing plug-in, etc. I can help guide readers through most of these glitches, if needed. That's what I do in teaching every week. In the end, please remember that this online portfolio is an experiment, one that I hope will be successful, but that *readers may need to exercise patience*, just like with any new kind of text they experience.

- **Become educated about why a candidate uses digital media technologies in their work**

As with the issue of not recognizing digital scholarship *as* scholarship, it is important for both the candidate to make a case for and reviewers to try to understand why the candidate's work needs to use digital technologies and multiple media in her work. In my case, I have not written justifications for each of the digital media texts in my portfolio because my body of scholarship—both print and digital—presents a holistic set of justifications by examining and interpreting *others'* digital media texts. For instance, here's an excerpted outline of my scholarship that addresses how to read digital scholarship:

- “Show, Not Tell: The Value of New Media Scholarship”—a print piece that sets up the state of digital scholarship (including the use of terms in the field) and discusses the issue of why “new media scholarship” isn't technology for technology's sake. Provides a sample way to read a piece of peer-reviewed digital scholarship (Miles' “Violence of Text”).
- “Reading the Text: A Rhetoric of Wow”—a co-authored webtext that discusses how the evaluation/assessment of student-produced digital media texts (although the same applies for scholarship) is specific to institutional contexts, and requires “generous reading” strategies on teachers' parts. Includes a close reading of a student-produced video poem, to show how one teacher (me) makes meaning from the media elements the student used.
- “Reinventing the Possibilities: Academic Literacy and New Media”—a co-authored webtext that addresses how teachers and students can build on the print literacies they already know from writing classes and transfer those literacies to reading and composing digital media texts.
- “Converging the ASS[umptions] Between U and ME; or, How New Media Can Bridge a Scholarly/Creative Split in English Studies”—a co-authored webtext (although there is a printable version for tenure readers) that provides a reading of a peer-reviewed piece of digital scholarship using Warner's heuristic for scholarly webtexts (see guidelines above). Compares the scholarly moves in digital media to those made in print scholarship.
- “Toward a Reading Heuristic for New Media Texts”—a (forthcoming in January) print article, based on a textbook I co-authored, that shows students and teachers how to break down the elements in digital media texts to interpret them. Uses a video poem (Ankerson's “Murmuring Insects”) as the basis for the reading. This is a how-to article written for undergraduates as well as teachers new to new media.

If you only read one or two pieces to help acclimate your reading experience of my tenure portfolio and pieces within, it should be the first and the last in this list (note that both are print pieces—the irony of this field is that we must make our arguments about digital media in print, at least in the beginning). The key, as I tell my editorial staff at *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, is to read generously. In other words, try to hypothesize why an author would use a particular medium, or set of media, to make her argument, not just assume that they're doing it to be “cool” or to “get one over on you.” That move would be antithetical to digital writing studies, which values rhetorically appropriate uses of digital media (i.e., that the *why* relates to the *what*, *how*, and *for whom*).

## 2. How can I educate tenure stakeholders regarding the intellectual rigor of nontraditional scholarship?

My research has shown that tenure readers assume print-based scholarly traditions when evaluating a candidate's digital materials. This problem creates a mismatch between the author's intentions for presenting scholarship in her field and the tenure reader's assumptions about what that scholarship should be. It's a perceptual issue that can, in part, be relieved by the guidelines and advice listed above—that is, reading generously by considering why the scholar has used digital media to make her argument. But, I have discovered that while tenure readers often *want* to read generously, they face the hurdle of unfamiliarity in regards to recognizing when and how digital media scholarship conforms to more traditional forms of intellectual labor. In other words, scholars accustomed to evaluating books and print articles in scholarly journals as well as creative texts in literary magazines and juried shows have difficulty recognizing that the same level of intellectual rigor goes into digital media scholarship.

This disconnect between the assumed intellectual labor in print scholarship versus the assumed *lack* of intellectual labor in digital scholarship became clear to me during a recent workshop on evaluating digital scholarship for tenure readers at a large Midwestern university; the department had just rewritten their tenure guidelines to explicitly include digital scholarship. Even so, about half of the audience was unconvinced by the discussion of a peer-reviewed piece, connecting scholarly conventions in digital media to those of print scholarship. I asked them to estimate how many hours of work go into a print article, and they were able to explain at length the complicated process of research, conversations with colleagues, drafting, and revising that went into a 25-page, double-spaced paper meant for submission to a scholarly journal. Hundreds of hours, they said. I then asked them to estimate how many hours of work they thought went into the 10-minute scholarly, peer-reviewed, published video I had shown them. They said “a few hours.” I was shocked, as were they when I replied that it took hundreds of hours and followed the same research and drafting process—just with different media than writing, but also including writing—that a scholarly article requires.

I know that digital media in English Studies rarely takes on the polished appearance of that which comes out of academic departments (or corporate settings) specializing in professional, consumer, Hollywood-style media production. That's not the point of using digital media in the humanities; the point is to (learn to) communicate using whatever media you need. Aristotle said about rhetoric that it is using whatever *available means of persuasion* are at hand. To wit, digital media offers more “means of persuasion” to communicate more effectively in a wider array of contexts than Aristotle may have encountered. For instance, although I am describing in writing the theoretical and ideological issues of digital media practices in humanities-based fields, I can better *show* you what I mean through the video I created that touches on these same concepts. (It's included in the About section of my digital portfolio.) That video builds on six years of knowledge about the state of digital scholarship in the humanities. The writing process includes using that knowledge, with additional research, to write a storyboard and script; collect the visual, aural, and textual assets; revise the script and storyboard; edit individual clips into an appropriate sequence; add titles that guide the reader through my main points; solicit feedback from colleagues; and to continue revising before presentation at a national conference to solicit further feedback—all of which took about 100 hours to produce the “draft” of this 7-minute video.

I know that *time* doesn't equate with intellectual rigor, but it provides useful numbers with which to begin conversations about the scholarly process of digital media. In this case, 100 hours is actually fairly quick in terms of compositional time-spent on a piece of digital media (and it's only a second draft), but I already knew the topic and the technologies I wanted to use to complete this "Research Design," as I call it in my tenure portfolio. Many scholars in this field learn new technologies with each design, to further expand their "available means of persuasion," but which lends to what readers outside of the field see as unpolished, unfinished work. As editor of *Kairos*, I constantly struggle with the need to satisfy internal audiences who recognize the value of this work and external audiences who expect it to be shiny and professionally produced. However, what I have discovered through my professional work and research is that this negotiation will never be resolved (at least not for the foreseeable future) because the boundaries between print scholarship and digital scholarship are continually changing with each new digital technology. I have made a scholarly living by existing in, and also pushing the boundaries of, this in-between space.

These are just a few of the issues I consider when putting forward a digital portfolio in my tenure application. The stakes are much higher now than they were in 1998 when I first started pushing these boundaries. If it is not already evident from the beginning of my letter, I offer my service to the university through my tenure application and what it could signify for the future of tenure applications at ISU, a project I am eager to help with. Although well-meaning senior colleagues have warned me throughout the years not to stake my tenure case on an untested (at any university<sup>2</sup>) digital portfolio, I take that chance because doing so will accomplish several of my professional and research goals.

My digital portfolio

- Provides a way to interact with my teaching and research activities in the media in which they were meant to be viewed,
- Enacts my research and teaching agendas of critical and rhetorical approaches to composing and reading scholarly multimedia through the design, interface, navigation, and descriptions in the portfolio,
- Offers an open-access repository of my entire body of work for public knowledge-building,
- Includes possible pre- and post-publication reviews through commenting features,
- Streamlines the tenure application by avoiding duplication of materials in print for different sections of the portfolio,
- Functions as a prototype for larger repositories/databases that might further streamline on-campus reporting processes for university reports,
- Acts as a living document, in testament to the etymology of *curriculum vitae*, and
- Is more sustainable and environmentally friendly than a print portfolio.

My portfolio (<http://www.ceball.com>) contains the same information (albeit organized in a non-linear way) as the print application, including narratives and citations of my teaching, research, and service. It also includes reading instructions, to assist in the transition between the paper application and the online portfolio. Please accept this letter as an explanation and justification of the form and content of my corpus, in my bid for

tenure and promotion to associate professor. Should you want to discuss the contents of or would like an in-person tutorial on navigating my digital tenure portfolio, please contact me via email (cball@ilstu.edu) or cell phone (309-706-4509). I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Cheryl E. Ball  
Assistant Professor

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I apologize if it seems presumptuous to invoke my external reviewers in a tenure-application letter, but I hope tenure readers will appreciate that it comes from a sense of professional obligation—this letter serves a public role in my tenure portfolio, which tenure-track scholars in my field are looking to as a model when they make their own applications. I know too well that, at other institutions, digital writing scholars are often lone experts in their departments, and they can become subject to external reviewers who function as gate-keepers instead of expert readers who interpret a scholar's body of work. By highlighting the importance of these readers' roles in my letter, I hope it can help others argue for including digital media experts as external reviewers in their cases.

<sup>2</sup> I recognize the irony that junior scholars who work in digital media are often the ones advocating for change in tenure guidelines when those scholars often have little power to enact change without the help of senior colleagues. Such collaboration was the case at The Ohio State University's Department of English, which recently changed their tenure guidelines to remove print-biased language and to accommodate work in digital media. Their revision process was published in the April 2008 *ADE Bulletin* (Selfe & Lee, "A More Capacious Caper"). Nationally, tenure track scholars report not wanting to attempt nontraditional scholarship before tenure for fear that these pieces won't count towards their cases. In a 2005 study of 45 digital media scholars in English/humanities departments, only **one** had used any digital work in her tenure case. The rest, despite being advocates for digital media in composition studies through their teaching and traditional research, hadn't tried to use a digital media text in their tenure cases (see Anderson, Atkins, Ball, Homicz-Millar, Selfe, & Selfe, "Integrating Multimodality Into Composition Curricula: Survey Methodology and Results from a CCCC Research Grant"). That's not surprising given that the Modern Language Association ("Report on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion," 2006) reported very few department chairs having **any** experience reading digital projects in tenure cases. Thus, there is a catch-22 present: digital scholarship is not accepted by tenure and promotion committees, so no one wants to produce it as a tenure-track scholar because it won't be accepted.... In order to break this cycle, which is unhealthy to the forward movement of scholarship in the humanities, I submit my work digitally.