the changing profession

Obsolescence

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I WAS INVITED BY THE MLA COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE PROFESSION TO SPEAK AT A CONVENTION WORKSHOP entitled "Keywords for a Digital Profession." My keyword was *obsolescence*, a catchall term for a multiplicity of conditions; there are material obsolescences, institutional obsolescences, and purely theoretical obsolescences, each type demanding a different response. I spent years pondering theoretical obsolescence while writing *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television*. The book argues, in part, that claims about the obsolescence of cultural forms often say more about those doing the claiming than they do about the objects of the claims. Neither the novel in particular nor the book more broadly nor print in general is dead, and agonized announcements of the death of such technologies and genres often serve to re-create an elite cadre of cultural producers and consumers, ostensibly operating on the margins of contemporary culture and profiting from their claims of marginality by creating a sense that their own values, once mainstream and now decaying, must be protected. Two oft-cited reports of the National Endowment for the Arts, *Reading at Risk* (2004) and *To Read or Not to Read* (2007), come to mind; like numerous other expressions of anxiety about the supposed decline of reading, each rhetorically creates a cultural wildlife preserve in which the apparently obsolete can flourish (United States). These texts suggest that obsolescence is, in this case at least, less a material state than a political project.

Naively, I assumed that publishing a book arguing that the book isn't dead wouldn't be so hard. What I didn't count on, as I worked on the revisions before submitting the manuscript for review, was the effects that the dot-com crash would have on university presses. It shook out for me like this: in December 2003, almost exactly seventy-two hours after I'd found out that my college's cabinet had taken its final vote to grant me tenure, I received an e-mail message from the editor of the scholarly press that had had the manuscript under review for the previous ten months. The news was not good: the press

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was declining to publish the book. The note, as encouraging as a rejection can be, stressed that the fault lay not with the manuscript but with the economic climate; the press had received two enthusiastic readers' reports, and the editor supported the project. The marketing department, however, overruled him on the editorial board, declaring the book "a bad financial risk in the current economy."

This cause for rejection prompted two immediate responses, one of which was most clearly articulated by my mother, who said, "They were planning on making money off of your book?" The fact is, they were—not much, perhaps, but that the press involved needed the book to make money and that it doubted it would highlights the insupportable economic model of academic publishing today. After the dot-com crash of 2001, when many university endowments took a nosedive, two of the hardest-hit academic units were university presses and libraries. The cuts in funding for libraries compounded the harm to presses, since numerous libraries, already straining under the exponentially rising costs of journals, especially in the sciences, managed the cutbacks by reducing the number of monographs they purchased. The result for library users was a slightly longer wait to obtain some of the books they needed, as libraries increasingly arranged to share their collections, but the result for presses, required to survive on the income produced by sales at the moment when sales began shrinking, was devastating. And as press after press reduces the number of titles that it publishes, marketing concerns often outweigh scholarly merit in publication decisions.

My experience of the crisis in academic publishing led me to rethink my argument about the book's continued viability. Perhaps there is a particular form of book, the academic book—more specifically, the first academic book—that is indeed threatened with obsolescence. This is not to say that the first book is dead. First books are still published, after all, if not in numbers sufficient to satisfy all our hiring and tenure requirements, and they still sell, if not in the numbers required to support the presses that put them out. The first book is, however, in a curious state, one that could usefully trouble our associations of cultural obsolescence with the "death" of this or that cultural form, for while in academia the first book is no longer *viable*, it is still *required*. If anything, the first book isn't dead; it is undead.

If one type of book might be thought of as undead, we need to rethink the relation between old media and new and ask what that relation bodes for the academy. If the traditional model of academic publishing is not dead but undead—again, not viable but still required—how should we approach our work and the publishing systems that bring it into being? Too much can be made of this metaphor, since the suggestion that contemporary academic publishing is governed by a kind of zombie logic might be read as indicating that traditional forms of publication refuse to stay put in their graves but instead walk the earth, rotting and putrescent, devoid of consciousness, eating the brains of the living—and this seems a bit of an overresponse. After all, how can zombies or, for that matter, vampires be stopped, except by decapitation or a stake through the heart—a necessary violence, given that these undead states are infectious? Just to be clear: I am not suggesting that the survival of the academy requires us to put academic publishing safely in its grave. I'm not being wholly facetious either, though, because I do want to indicate that certain aspects of the academic publishing process are neither quite as alive as we'd like them to be nor quite as dead as might be most convenient. It's likely that we could get along fine, for the most part, with the undead of academic publishing—studies of radio and the LP indicate that obsolete media forms have always had curious afterlives. But it's important for us to consider the work that the book is and isn't doing for us, the ways it remains vibrant

and vital, and the ways it has become undead, haunting the living from beyond the grave.

But a few distinctions are necessary. The obsolescence faced by the first academic book is not, primarily, material; a radical shift to all-digital delivery would by itself do nothing to revive the form. However much I might insist that we in the humanities must expand our focus beyond ink on paper to understand and take advantage of pixels on screens, the print form still functions well, and numerous studies have indicated that a simple move to electronic distribution in the current system of academic publishing will not be enough to bail the system out, since printing, storing, and distributing the material form of the book represent only a fraction of its production costs (e.g., Crewe). In fact, as many have pointed out, the digital may be more prone to a material obsolescence than is print. Try reading Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* or Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* on a Mac: Apple has fully retired its support for Classic mode with the advent, on the hardware side, of Intel-based processors that can't boot into OS 9 and with the release, on the software side, of OS 10.5, which eliminates Classic support for PowerPC machines. Couple this forward march of technology with the fact that Eastgate, the publisher of these and other important first-generation hypertexts, has failed to release them in versions compatible with the current Mac system. Technologies move on, and technological formats degrade, posing dangers to digital textual futures that the Electronic Literature Organization has been working to bring into public view, through its "acid-free bits" campaign and its more recent work with the Library of Congress to archive digital literary texts (Liu, et al; Montfort and Wardrip-Fruin). Without such active work to preserve electronic texts and without the ongoing interest and commitment of publishers, many digital texts face an obsolescence that is not at all theoretical.

Other kinds of digital texts experience an obsolescence that masks unexpected persistence. Take, for example, my nearly six-year-old blog, which I named *Planned Obsolescence* (www.plannedobsolescence.net) as a tongue-in-cheek jab at the fact that I'd just finished a long-term, apparently durable project (the book), and was left with the detritus of many smaller ideas that demanded immediacy and yet seemed destined to fade away into nothingness. The blog is the perfect vehicle for such ephemera, since new posts force older ones down the front page and off into the archives—and yet the apparent ephemerality of the blog post contains a surprising durability, thanks to the technologies of searching, filtering, and archiving that have developed across the Web, as well as to the network of blog conversations that keep the archives in play. Blogs do die, often when their authors stop posting, sometimes when they're deleted. But even when apparently dead, a blog persists, in archives and caches, and accretes life around it: human visitors are drawn in by *Google* searches or links from other blogs, and spambots are attracted like vermin to the apparently abandoned structure. Obsolescence may be engineered into a blog's architecture, but this ephemerality is misleading; our interaction with blogs in networked environments keeps them alive long after they've apparently died.

Alongside the blog, I want to hold up the first academic book, which faces an obsolescence that is primarily not material but institutional and that arises from the environment in which the book is produced. If, after all, there's something obsolete about the book, it's not its content, which is still important to the development of scholarly thought. Nor is the problem the book's form. The system, the process, through which the book comes into being has ceased to function. I mentioned earlier that the message I'd received declining my book on financial grounds produced two immediate responses. The first was my mother's bewildered disbelief; the second came from Matt Kirschenbaum, who left a comment on

Planned Obsolescence saying that he could not understand why I couldn't simply put the manuscript and the two positive readers' reports online, where my text would likely garner a larger and more diverse readership than the same manuscript in print would:

> In fact I completely understand why that's not realistic, and I'm not seriously advocating it. Nor am I suggesting that we all become our own online publishers, at least not unless that's part of a continuum of different options. But the point is, the system's broken and it's time we got busy fixing it. What ought to count is peer review and scholarly merit, not the physical form in which the text is ultimately delivered.

While I agree wholeheartedly with Matt, the current system of peer review is part of what's broken, part of what's made a vibrant mode of scholarly communication undead. In the traditional print-based process, the placement of peer review before selection for publication indicates that this review serves a gatekeeping function, one that allows publishers and editors to cope with the scarce economics of print. In the digital realm, however, as publishers including Michael Jensen of the National Academies Press have pointed out, scarcity is over. Because anyone can publish anything online—and, from a perspective that values the free and open communication of the products of scholarly research, not only can but should—we face instead an extraordinary plenitude. The digital humanities need to develop not a means of applying the current peer-review system to new modes of digital publishing in order to create artificial scarcity—which might transfer to these modes the problems that made the first book undead—but rather a means of coping with abundance, of working in a living system of scholarly communication. Peer review needs to be transformed from a gatekeeping system into a postpublication system that doesn't determine whether a text should be published but instead measures how it has been (and how it should be) received and what its place in the ecosystem of scholarly communication is. The center of gravity of peer review needs to be shifted from regulation to communication, transforming review into a mechanism for facilitating more fluid and productive exchanges among peers.

Much of my work over the last two years has focused on how such a mechanism, which I've called "peer-to-peer review," could be developed, what its affordances might be, and how the transformation of academic publishing from a system focused on the production and dissemination of individual products into a system focused more broadly on facilitating the processes of scholarly communication could enable us to emerge from the crisis of the last several years. This work has been done largely on *MediaCommons* (mediacommons.futureofthebook.org), where I'm trying to put my metaphoric money where my argumentative mouth is. While this digital scholarly network, being developed with the Institute for the Future of the Book, has faced a number of hurdles (the financial not least of them) in its as-yet-incomplete development, the largest obstacle that it will encounter, once the system is fully up and running, may well be the academy's conservative governing structures, whose motto, like that attributed to defenders of tradition everywhere, could be "we have never done it that way before." Whether hiring, tenure, and promotion committees will be persuaded to take seriously the "new metrics of scholarly authority" that *MediaCommons* will foster remains to be seen (Jensen).

We in the humanities today face less a material than an institutional obsolescence; we are caught in systems that no longer serve our purposes. But because we are, by and large, our institutions, or, rather, because they are us, the greatest challenge we face is not obsolescence but our response to it. Like novelists who feel their cultural centrality threatened by the rise of newer media forms, we can shore

up the boundaries between ourselves and the Internet's open spaces of intellectual exchange; we can extol the ways things have always been done; we can bemoan our marginalization in a culture that continues marching forward into the digital future—and in so doing we can further undermine our influence on the main threads of intellectual discussion in contemporary public life. We can build supports for an undead system, and we can watch the profession itself become undead. Or we can work to change the ways we communicate and the systems through which we attribute value to communication, opening ourselves to the possibility that new modes of publishing might enable not just more texts but better texts, not just an evasion of obsolescence but a new life for scholarship. The point, finally, is not whether any one particular technology can provide a viable future but whether we have the institutional will to commit to the development of a system that will make such a technology viable and keep it viable into the future.

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