Response Essays

Strategic Simulations

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Amy E. Robillard and Ron Fortune’s recent JAC article, “Toward A New Content for Writing Courses: Literary Forgery, Plagiarism, and the Production of Belief,” describes the value of teaching case studies about clandestine and deviant writing in undergraduate writing classes. By studying literary forgery and whole-text plagiarism in particular, Robillard and Fortune argue, students can learn about “factors outside the text that contribute to belief in the value of the text” (186). Robillard and Fortune’s article hinges on how belief in a text and its author accumulates as a form of cultural capital. “Student texts carry relatively little cultural capital,” they write, so “such texts must produce belief in readers without the benefit of preestablished legitimizing mechanisms except insofar as the instructor alone is a legitimizing mechanism” (186). In Robillard and Fortune’s curricular model, students would learn about the situated rhetorical awareness necessary to pull off a successful literary forgery or whole-text plagiarism not in order to become forgers and cheats themselves, but to see how cultural capital, validity, and belief are produced through a series of careful decisions and actions.

I want to extend Robillard and Fortune’s argument by suggesting that having students study an even larger class of textual deceptions, ones I will call strategic simulations, can lead not only to increased awareness but also to an adroitness at engaging in subversive cultural action. Building off of Robillard and Fortune’s argument about the production of belief, I will describe how studying an array of strategic simulations—including spoof videos, mockumentaries, Nikki S. Lee’s performance art, culture jamming, and the Sokal Hoax of 1996—provides students with blueprints for creating their own textual interventions. The forms of strategic simulations I will discuss are different from those described by Robillard and Fortune in that my examples hinge upon what I call the reveal: when and how a simulation makes its own duplicity and subversive intentions obvious. Through the reveal, strategic simulations foreground the ways they challenge the systems of representation foundational to the originals they simulate. It is through learning about the
reveal, I will argue, that students can gain access to a powerful mode of textual disruption. While simulations still struggle to accomplish their goals, I suggest that teaching about strategic simulations that hinge on the reveal moves students out of the consumer position in relation to clandestine texts and into the more risky, exciting, and important position of being cultural agents. The strategic simulations I describe utilize the production of belief for a purpose.

The Production of Belief

Robillard and Fortune’s “Toward A New Content for Writing Courses” contributes to recent scholarship in composition studies that works to make the study of writing the central content of writing classes. This move in the field is perhaps best captured in Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle’s June 2007 CCC article, “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning ‘First-Year Composition’ as ‘Introduction to Writing Studies.’” Downs and Wardle argue for “teaching about writing . . . as if writing studies is a discipline with content knowledge to which students should be introduced, thereby changing their understandings about writing and thus changing the ways they write” (553). At first read, such a claim may sound strange. Isn’t writing already what students learn about in their writing classes? Surprisingly, the answer is that this is only partly the case. Process-based curricula have structured writing classes so that students learn how to write while studying a wide range of topics and social theories (Robillard and Fortune 186). Suggesting that the study of writing become the content of writing classes and not just what students do is not to discount the importance of social theory; it is to say, however, that the study of writing generates its own social theory. A writing studies curriculum that makes writing the topic of inquiry—I have called this a socio-graphemic approach (Schaffner)—engages student writers in learning how to write more effectively through studying writing as constitutive of academic disciplines, social and political systems, identities, and the fabric of everyday life.

Robillard and Fortune argue for a particular kind of writing-based curriculum focused on understanding how belief in a text and its author
is produced. Belief matters because producing it involves productively inhabiting a complex textual system and because student authors usually write with little belief in the authenticity of their writing. Studying clandestine acts of writing such as literary forgery and whole-text plagiarism, Robillard and Fortune show, gets at the mechanics of the production of belief. Robillard and Fortune take as a case study the literary forgeries of William Henry Ireland who, in the late eighteenth century, created an intertextual archive of materials he passed off as lost writings of none other than William Shakespeare. The most astounding thing about the Ireland forgeries is that they were successful. The "public’s eagerness to believe rendered them less than rigorous in their analysis of the documents Ireland produced" (Robillard and Fortune 194). The other intriguing thing about the forgeries, and Robillard and Fortune attend very closely to this fact, is that Ireland did not merely imitate Shakespeare’s style by producing a play or a couple of sonnets. Ireland forged an entire archive of supporting materials to support what he called the lost play *Vortigern and Rowena* (or *Vortigern, an Historical Play*), a "constellation of documents" (194) that authenticated the literary texts at their center. As Robillard and Fortune contend, "Forgery exaggerates, and therefore makes particularly visible, intertextuality and the role it plays in the production of belief" (196).

The case study of William Henry Ireland’s forgeries leads Robillard and Fortune to speculate on what might happen if a student were to download a complete final essay and then create a William Henry Ireland-esque array of the process-related supporting materials (prewrites, drafts, revisions, edits) that typically appear in a final portfolio. Such a forgery, of course, would work to create the appearance that the final paper was crafted through hard work on behalf of the student. While Robillard and Fortune do not contend to having seen such a forged portfolio, and neither have I, they insist that such a "whole-text plagiarism" involving a downloaded final paper and an intertextual portfolio of forged supporting documents "might represent teachers’ success in teaching that writing is a process" (204). This is to say that forgeries take skill, rhetorical savvy, design sense, and knowledge about what a writing teacher is looking for as evidence of adequate thinking, writing, revising, and editing. To forge well, in this frame, is to write well.
Robillard and Fortune make what I think is a bold and encouraging argument in “Toward a New Content for Writing Courses.” Instead of demonizing plagiarism and trying to help teachers avoid it from cropping up in their classes, they place value on the work and intelligence required to plagiarize in the mode of William Henry Ireland or the hypothetical student with the forged constellation of intertextual, process-oriented documents. In what follows, I take their argument a step further by showing how the study of an even broader range of strategic simulations might purposively teach students to become writers capable of pulling off a broad range of textual simulations with the ultimate goal of disrupting what can be entrenched, stable, and uninviting genres and discursive conventions. Of course, simulations do not always accomplish these goals by bringing about tangible changes. In fact, they can reify their originals. But where strategic simulations falter in accomplishing their goals, teaching students to simulate strategically maintains its potential in encouraging students to act as cultural producers with rhetorical agency.

**Strategic Simulations**

Textual simulations that reveal their nature as forgeries are among some of our most entertaining and persuasive texts. Spoofs, send-ups, parodies, and imitations of all kinds use verisimilitude to capture and keep our attention as we puzzle over whether or not what we are looking at or listening to is “for real.” By revealing themselves as simulations, simulations can create a tension between being funny and functioning as charged critical objects. I will look at a range of examples of this kind of text, showing how directing student research toward the study of strategic simulations would mean providing training in the art, design, and “rhetoric of agitation” (Bowers and Ochs). I privilege agitation to prioritize a view that writers are capable of doing things in the world and fostering change. Within this frame, writing matters in a way that counters the view of writing (endemic in academic settings) as relatively inert and “good” when it conforms to preexisting expectations. By attending to strategic simulations, I mean to extend and multiply Robillard and Fortune’s focus
on how the study of forgeries can teach students about the production of belief. Strategic simulations demonstrate how produced belief can be used to effect change and disrupt existing systems of representation.

One such system of meaning is representation. We find strategic simulations that challenge the limitations of existing genres in publications such as The Onion, sometimes finding ourselves duped long enough to have to ask the question, "Is this for real?" In a recent video from The Onion that circulated online via a number of video hosting sites, a staid looking congressperson is seen giving impassioned testimony about the importance of the "Ocular Penetration Restriction Act of 2007." By simulating both the congressional scene and the format of C-Span, this simulation functions as both tasteless humor and a critique of the conventions of congressional governmentality. By being over-the-top, the video only partly pretends to be the congressional testimony that it simulates, and as a self-revealing simulation it shows what it means to mobilize what a number of authors have called the typified rhetorical action of genre (Freedman and Medway). The authors of simulations must act on their genre awareness in the same way that successful authors in that genre do; however, in the case of simulations, the strategy is one of generic appropriation and redirection with a purpose.

Larger genre systems (Bazerman; Russell) are also questioned and reappropriated by strategic simulations. Such video simulations can be found on The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, for instance, where the full array of speech genres (Bakhtin) used in investigative television journalism are co-opted and simulated to both provide a version of "the news" (that challenges the pre-eminence of typical news broadcasts) while parodying the limitations inherent to TV news reporting as a genre system. Christopher Guest's mockumentaries work in a similar way, questioning the genres of documentary film making as adequate tools of filmic inquiry. Guest's films feature the couple-on-the-couch interview, the live-action-scene, experts in the field, and drama—all of the elements we traditionally find in a documentary aimed at unearthing what subcultures are all about. Mockumentaries by Guest such as This is Spinal Tap, Waiting for Guffman, and Best in Show (to name just a few) make us question the pastiched subcultures they display as plastic. The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and mockumentary films entertain while they
question entrenched systems of representation that we regularly consume. As case studies in a writing class, students could examine, critique, and ultimately produce work in the mode of these texts. Such strategic simulations position student writers as enabled to compose texts that do not merely aim to enter existing systems of representation, but question and even ultimately alter them.

In the area of performance art, Nikki S. Lee’s snapshots of her work (viewable online at www.tonkonow.com/lee.html) explore the representation of subcultures in a different way. Lee’s work examines a system of representation we could call the semiotics of cultural membership, in that Lee has developed several “projects,” as she calls them, in which she becomes what appears to be a full-fledged member of multiple subcultures. To pull off these simulations, and they are incredibly believable, Lee studied her target subcultures—attending principally to dress, habits, gestures, cultural consumption, and practice—and photographed herself as if she were a community member. Her photos, displayed in galleries internationally (and found online), show Lee as a skateboarder, tourist, Midwesterner, punk, octogenarian, Hispanic, swing dancer, and more. Lee’s work challenges our conception of what it means to belong to a subculture as fixed or relatively stable. If Lee merely photographed herself simulating what it means to belong to one subculture, her project might not reveal itself as being concerned with the staged semiotics of membership. But by moving in and out of so many cultural personae, Lee’s work overtly reveals itself as concerned with the plasticity of identity and ubiquity of simulation. I see Lee’s simulations as hinging on the reveal because only by revealing their “inauthentic” nature do they become strategically aimed at questioning a belief in authentic identity. Lee makes her viewers consider what the semiotics of belonging and the embodied rhetoric of cultural identity consist of. It is the “ah-ha” moment when the reveal becomes evident that a simulation moves from being a mere forgery or fake to functioning as textual, generic, and social critique.

Up until this point, I have discussed simulations from visual culture (videos, TV programs, films, and photographs), pointing out what such texts tell us about genre, genre systems, and the semiotics of representation. In a writing class centered on writing as the principle subject matter,
the study of such visual texts can be helpful in illustrating the mechanisms of abstract rhetorical structures such as genre and semiotics. In a sense, visual texts help us "see" such abstractions. In the following examples, I move to describing how written simulations work by co-opting additional systems of representation: typography and document design in the first example and situated discourse in the second.

Some of the most widespread forms of culture jamming, referred to by Christine Harold as "symbolic sabotage" and questioned in her account (Harold 27–69), function as strategic simulations that appropriate the semiotics of an established form or system of representation to present a counter-message in the guise of the original. What is different about culture-jamming texts is how they often depend on carefully designed image and text. Defaced billboards and signs, for instance, work to produce a disruption, and some of the most effective ones take visual and typographic care to simulate the style of the original billboard or sign in a way that integrates the counter-message into close dialogue with the original. The integration is seldom seamless, however, as culture-jamming forgeries depend on revealing themselves as interventions. In the case of doctored billboards and signs, the reveal is often in the typographic nature of the counter-message which, on first look, may look like the original, but on second glance becomes recognizable as the work of a culture jammer.

When, in January 2001, a group of activists changed the signs on San Francisco's "Bush Street" to read "Puppet Street" (Newman; Adbusters), great care was taken to make the new signs simulate the look—in terms of color and typography—of the various originals they replaced. The simulations were not visually identical to the originals, however, since a perfect forgery would erase the purpose of having the new signs ("Puppet") comment on the originals that bore the name of the then president elect ("Bush"). These instances of culture jamming involve forgeries that call attention to themselves, and by doing so, culture jamming simulations question laws and cultural mores against appropriating public places such as billboards and street signs for the expression of local, individual messages. For culture jamming of this kind to be effective, document design, color, and typography must be closely attended to, a system of representation that must be as critically attended to as any other
if the counter-message is to circulate effectively. Document design, these examples illustrate, is part of both message and simulating counter-message in a kind of dialogue in culture jamming of this kind.

I want to conclude my discussion of strategic simulations with the most textual, or alphabetic of my examples: what has become known as the Sokal Hoax. This strategic simulation both relies on and targets discourse conventions, as Alan Sokal’s strategic intervention approximated the writing in a discipline (cultural studies) to ape knowledge production in that field. The Sokal Hoax is a provocative example of how linguistic systems of representation, in addition to the others I have mentioned, can be appropriated for the purposes of disruption and intervention. While the Sokal Hoax has received surprisingly scant attention in the main journals in composition studies, it has been extensively addressed in journals and collections dedicated to the fields of science and cultural studies.

For readers who might be unfamiliar with the Sokal Hoax, here is a quick gloss of what happened: in 1996, the physicist Alan Sokal submitted an article titled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” to the cultural studies journal *Social Text* (published by Duke UP). When the article was accepted for publication, Sokal brought about the reveal by publishing a two-page companion piece in the now defunct journal *Lingua Franca*. In this companion piece, Sokal indicated that “Transgressing the Boundaries” was “a modest (though admittedly uncontrolled) experiment” in which he aimed to “publish an article liberally salted with nonsense [that] sounded good and... flattered the [Social Text] editors’ ideological preconceptions” (“A Physicist” 2). Sokal admitted that his provocations toward “a liberatory postmodern science” were meant as a test of the journal editors’ ideological leanings and ability to read critically. “For some years,” argued Sokal, “I’ve been troubled by the apparent decline in the standards of intellectual rigor in certain precincts of the American academic humanities” (“A Physicist” 2). In response, he took it upon himself to intervene with what I am calling a strategic simulation.

There have been many critical and disapproving readings of Sokal’s tactics (several of which are collected in *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That*
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*Shook the Academy*); most salient of these is the claim that by publishing an intentionally specious argument in an academic journal, Sokal undermined the trust necessary for the system of academic publishing to produce cutting-edge knowledge. We see this critique in what Bruce Robbins and Andrew Ross, the editors of *Social Text*, said in their response to Sokal in the following issue of the journal: “All of us were distressed at the deceptive means by which Sokal chose to make his point” (Editors 54). Of course, Sokal could have made his critique of the “intellectual rigor in certain precincts of the American academic humanities” in a number of ways; however, by opting for a strategic simulation, he intentionally provoked what has become a decade of debate.

Reading Sokal’s *Social Text* article, we see that it was an exquisite fake of the caliber of William Henry Ireland’s Shakespeare forgeries. Whereas Ireland appropriated the style of Shakespeare and authenticated his forgeries with an array of supporting materials (also forged), Sokal appropriated the style of theoretically inclined academic discourse in cultural studies. His phrasings, references, and topic headings—“Quantum Mechanics: Uncertainty, Complementarity, Discontinuity and Interconnectedness” and “Hermeneutics of Classical General Relativity,” for example—are superb simulations of actual section headings one might find in a piece of research in *Social Text*. This is to say that Sokal wrote for his audience, producing belief (in Robillard and Fortune’s terms)—but with one critical difference: the productivity of Sokal’s simulation depended on it being revealed immediately upon publication. Sokal used *Lingua Franca* to orchestrate his reveal, since simply publishing the fake would have failed to render that fake a public instrument of agitation. Sokal’s hoax brought about at least one substantive change in that it helped pressure the editors of *Social Text* to adopt a system of peer review. With that said, it would be overstating the truth to argue that the Sokal Hoax contributed to large-scale restructurings at *Social Text*, Duke UP, or in cultural studies. Strategic simulations wield various kinds of power and have variable consequences; calibrating the relationship between the simulation and its measurable effects is worth studying in a writing studies curriculum.

Furthermore, student-based inquiry into the Sokal Hoax would, as with the other simulations I have mentioned, necessarily include an
ethical dimension (the charge that Sokal violated the ethics of academic publishing was a principle complaint among his detractors). It would also be an inquiry into the linguistic and rhetorical features of situated, disciplinary writing. The Sokal Hoax was and is a disturbance, an agitation, an intervention. It was pulled off through a strategic simulation that angered some, satisfied others, but most of all made a marked difference in the fabric of trust that had been taken for granted in academic publishing. By appropriating a set of conventionalized writing forms characteristic of 1990s cultural studies, Sokal pulled off a strategic simulation that tricked, deceived, and pretended to be something that it is not—but only briefly, since Sokal immediately revealed the nature and purpose of his forgery. The reveal was instrumental to the strategies of his simulation. Different from the forgeries Robillard and Fortune discuss, this strategic simulation (and the others mentioned before it) advertised its in-authenticity because it aimed not to pass itself off as original but to question the original it simulated.

I want to insist that textual simulations that appropriate genres, genre systems, semiotic codes, design conventions, and situated language forms while revealing themselves as forgeries have great potential as objects of study in the writing classroom. These strategic simulations assert themselves powerfully in relation to what they simulate through producing belief in themselves and assiduously simulating systems of representation. These examples question existing and sometimes entrenched modes of meaning making in the world; however, they also present new channels for that meaning creation. A writing curriculum based around the study of strategic simulations would be one that encouraged students to create simulating texts of their own, critiquing the limitations of such perennial gripes as classroom and institutional genres: the essay, report, reading response paper, teacher evaluation, or grade report. A writing curriculum concerned with clandestine, deviant forms of composition that act up and act out reminds students that textual producers can at least try to disrupt existing systems of representation and the attendant ideologies that are bound up with them.
Conclusion

In the case of William Henry Ireland’s Shakespeare forgeries, Ireland attempted to have his work count as that of another. In the hypothetical case of Robillard and Fortune’s forged student portfolio, the point would be to have the work of another passed off as one’s own. Labor transfer takes place in both cases, with the forgery acting as a duplicitous instrument that produces not only belief in the text and its author but also, as Robillard and Fortune discuss, cultural capital. William Henry Ireland and the hypothetical student have something to gain from not being found out.

As I have shown, the trope of forgery and simulation is prevalent in many of the texts that we watch, read, and enjoy. In some ways, simulation is a central fiber of our textual culture. We consume simulations in the form of web videos, mockumentaries, performance art, culture jamming, and hoaxes. Given the wide distribution of cultural and textual forgeries, Robillard and Fortune are smart to focus on literary forgery and whole-text plagiarism as case studies where the production of belief can be isolated and studied. Building off their work, I have discussed what I describe as strategic simulations to get at a set of parallel but somewhat different mechanisms. In the examples of strategic simulations I have discussed, the reveal (that a simulation makes its duplicitous nature and intentions obvious to viewers and readers) is critical to the execution of the simulation. These are texts that mock, parody, question, and call for change. They interrogate existing modes and patterns of representation (the genres of TV news reporting, the practices of documentary film making, the semiotics of sub-cultural membership, and academic discourse) by adopting those modes and patterns while overwriting them with new messages and questions. This is in excess of what we do when we study a set of situated rhetorical practices in order to fit in or make sense within a context. Strategic simulations amuse, call into question, and as we have seen in the case of the Sokal Hoax, incite furious debate. They have everything to gain from being found out.

Robillard and Fortune call for adding attention to forgeries in a writing curriculum. But what would it mean to build a writing curriculum around the study of an even wider archive of strategic simulations? As I
envision it, this would be a writing curriculum concerned with defiant writing, deviant writing, writing that intercedes, disrupts, and refuses to be compliant. This would not be a writing curriculum aimed at channeling students toward conventionality and appropriacy, but one concerned with inappropriacy with a purpose. Strategic simulations are direct actions meant to disrupt discourses, reveal conventions, and voice disgust. Importantly, many strategic simulations refuse to voice dissent through what are thought of as typical channels of debate and critique in some kind of orderly public sphere. The strategic simulation bypasses such channels by appropriating existing genres and forms, taking them over, and overwriting them with new messages.

As they articulate them, the implications of Robillard and Fortune’s argument are that students can learn about how meaning, belief, and authority are produced by and through texts. In responding to their article, I have tried to capture a much larger and, I think, potentially more radical set of implications. Teaching about forgery can undoubtedly result in the outcomes Robillard and Fortune describe, but it can also teach students to forge with a purpose. Perhaps this is why the textually clandestine has been avoided as a topic of inquiry in our writing classes to date. Yet, a writing curriculum built around strategic simulations would be a writing class in which we could examine the production of belief while teaching students a range of strategies and methods for acting as cultural agents via the apparatus of the textual simulation.

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Notes

1. In *College English*, Donald Lazare has made passing reference to Sokal in relationship to discourse on the left; Patrick Brantlinger mentions Sokal’s article in *Social Text* in relationship to skepticism about the humanities immediately following “the affair”; and Bonnie Kyburz has briefly written about Sokal in relationship to work in science studies. There is no published work dealing with the Sokal Hoax in *CCC*.

2. A useful collection of responses to Sokal’s piece in *Social Text*, including that article, is *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy*. 


