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## From readerly to writerly (and back again) : a rhetorical analysis of greentext stories

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## ABSTRACT

### FROM READERLY TO WRITERLY (AND BACK AGAIN): A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF GREENTEXT STORIES

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Greentext stories, a relatively new genre of short fiction, emerged from the image board site 4chan in early 2010. Although 4chan is known for its off-color, offensive humor, the popularity of greentext stories on the imageboard as well as on other websites warrants a serious rhetorical analysis. Drawing primarily on ideas from Collin Gifford Brooke, Roland Barthes, Kenneth Burke, and Carolyn Miller, greentext stories are first posted to 4chan as part of a performative dialogue, creating threads which are large writerly texts made of smaller readerly ones; this offers anonymous 4chan users, who tend to be outsiders from mainstream society, a way to identify with each other through shared stories. As users share notable stories on more mainstream sites, Ridolfo and DeVoss's idea of rhetorical velocity takes over, allowing one's text to be reappropriated and even recomposed by another. This process allows the genre to creatively rewrite popular stories based on established archetypes. The way in which greentext stories spread and are rewritten raises key questions of authorship and copyright and how far one can go in appropriating and rewriting the work of others, including for profit, as is seen with recently published collections of greentext stories. As the genre continues to spread, it is certainly possible that claims in authorship will begin to increase in a genre that was originally authorless.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
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FROM READERLY TO WRITERLY (AND BACK AGAIN):  
A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF  
GREENTEXT STORIES

BY

AGUTSIN MORADO IV  
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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Plus, anyone else I might have forgotten.

## DEDICATION

To Anons everywhere, whether you are out posting or simply lurking.

>Perhaps the heaviest things we lift are not our weights, but our feels.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In March 2010, a new genre of literature, the greentext story, was born. Greentext stories first appeared on 4chan, an imageboard site notorious for lax posting rules and granting its users the option to upload content to the site anonymously. The genre of greentext stories is in constant motion. Although stories are first composed on and posted to 4chan, users often share them on the mainstream web, exposing the genre to a broader audience, which can either experience them passively, as one would a conventional text, or creatively rewrite them.

The origin and spread of greentext stories can be attributed mainly to two concepts: delivery as performance (Brooke) and rhetorical velocity (Ridolfo and DeVoss). The first part, delivery as performance, considers how the medium of 4chan, an imageboard site with an antiquated interface, permits users to engage in collaborative storytelling using greentext. Composing and sharing greentext stories is a social act, consisting of a response to an exigence (Miller). 4chan users, often called “anons” (short for anonymous), belong to an outsider culture – the anonymous nature of 4chan permits users to share content that is offensive without consequence. The exigence of greentext then is the outsider status of anons, and their response is to share stories to identify with other outsiders. By writing and sharing greentext stories on 4chan, anons are able to assert and affirm their outsider status. Additionally, anons deliver their stories in a collective storytelling performance – an act of “discursive production” (Brooke 181),

creating a large writerly text from smaller readerly ones. Writerly texts are written by many users, an active audience, and readerly texts by a single author for passive audiences (Barthes 5).

Also at play is rhetorical velocity, closely tied to delivery as performance. Greentext stories originally posted to 4chan are not only shared on other sites but are also creatively rewritten by third parties. These rewritten stories, which often build on the established vernacular and archetypes of existing greentext stories, often find their way back to 4chan, restarting the cycle. The result is an appropriation of 4chan culture by a broader audience. Stories that were once shared between a community of anonymous outsiders become a form of popular entertainment on one's mainstream social media feed.

What this thesis hopes to ultimately emphasize is the fact that greentext stories are neither completely readerly nor completely writerly, but they can become either depending on where they are posted and how they are used. In fact, where they are shared determines how the audience will experience and use them. In articles for news outlets, where they are included as part of "Best of" lists, Greentext becomes readerly because they are made to be consumed by a passive audience that reads but does not add to the dialogue. On the other hand, there is no place where greentext is more writerly than on 4chan, where anons have equal authority as reader/writers, each able to contribute to the performance of greentext.

## CHAPTER 2

### GREENTEXT ON 4CHAN

Know Your Meme, a website devoted to documenting Internet memes, defines greentext stories as “anecdotes written in short, concise sentences...using [4chan’s] ‘green-text’ code” (“Green Text Stories” n.p.). What is meant by “green-text code” may be unfamiliar to a 4chan newcomer but is simple to understand. When writing a post on 4chan, beginning a line of text with a greater-than sign (>) renders the font color of that line green upon the publication of the post, hence the name greentext. Because the font color of 4chan posts is set to maroon by default, greentext pops off the pinkish background upon which it appears.

Greentext stories are made of several of these bullet-point style lines and comprise a narrative, with each bullet point consisting of a terse, concise sentence. Stories are often confessional in nature, dealing with the authors’ triumphs and tragedies alike. Given the anonymity that 4chan offers, the site offers a perfect medium for people to tell stories in which they may have done things that are unethical or perhaps illegal. Other greentext stories may be humorous, perhaps even silly, and thus not meant to be taken seriously.

As briefly mentioned earlier, 4chan is an imageboard site launched by Christopher Poole, perhaps better known by his screen name “moot,” on October 1, 2003. Only 15 at the time, Poole intended 4chan as a place for users to discuss anime and manga. Since then the site has expanded to 66 boards. Most boards cater to specific interests, including sports, video games, music, and literature, and have specific rules that users must follow, lest they receive a temporary ban from

the board. This thesis, however, will focus on one board, Robot 9001, or /r9k/ for short – the board on which greentext stories originated and are usually posted.

4chan is notable for allowing users to post anonymously. Although one may use a screen name when posting, few ever do. Another interesting feature of 4chan is that it lacks an archive, meaning that all posts and threads are eventually deleted after a certain amount of time; the lifespan of a thread ranges from several hours to just a few minutes. Because of this, many individuals take it upon themselves to save content they find interesting to their own hard drives, or upload content to an external site.

4chan is most often thought of as an anarchic free-for-all: random, off-kilter, and devoid of civility and respect for others' differences. Although anons on 4chan have proven capable of organizing and moving to action, users' daily interactions on the site seem to be less deliberate and more playful – “for the lulz (laughs),” as anons often say. However, for 4chan to be something more than a hive of malicious internet trolls, the readers of this thesis must see 4chan as communal and egalitarian– an online society based on sharing stories.

## CHAPTER 3

### GENRE, DIGITAL MEDIA, AND THE ROLE OF THE WRITER

Genre and composition theory explains much about greentext stories. Much of this theory relates to genre as a response to a rhetorical situation, the relationship between authors and their readers, and various innovations of the digital age, including peer-to-peer sharing and rhetorical velocity. A rhetorical analysis of greentext stories must also take into account the fact that with digitally-based genres of literature, there are no writers or readers in the traditional sense, but rather users, each of whom carries equal authority as potential producers of text.

In “Genre as Social Action,” Carolyn Miller points out that most definitions of genre are inadequate, focusing too much on form. She argues that a “rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (151). She cites “Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism,” in which Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson state that “the rhetorical forms that establish genres are stylistic and substantive responses to perceived situational demands” (19). Additionally drawing from Lloyd Bitzer’s concept of exigence, “an imperfection marked by urgency” (“The Rhetorical Situation” 6), and Kenneth Burke’s concept of motive, she arrives at her thesis, saying that genre is “a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of rhetorical action” and that, “as action, it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose” (163). Elsewhere, she emphasizes the importance of motive in genre as “a conventional social purpose, or exigence, within the recurrent situation” (162).

When considering genre as one's response to a rhetorical situation, it becomes easy to equate a genre with a script and people writing within that genre as performers. In *Lingua Fracta: Toward a Rhetoric of New Media*, Collin Gifford Brooke redefines the five rhetorical canons in light of new media. Particularly notable is Brooke's treatment of the last canon, Delivery. Traditionally, Delivery played a larger role in oral rhetoric, in which one would recite a composition after committing it to memory. In written rhetoric, however, this canon is usually viewed as irrelevant, as there seems to be little need to deliver, in a traditional sense, something that has already been written down. Brooke argues that "a model of delivery restricted to the physical distribution of commodities is insufficient for an understanding of new media" (174). He encourages the reader to see Delivery instead as both the medium in which a text is presented and as a discursive performance between users.

In *Lingua Fracta*, Brooke looks at ways in which various media have evolved to explain how the canons themselves have had to be adapted to these changes. To illustrate this, he compares print encyclopedias with Wikipedia. Encyclopedias are written by committees of qualified experts; Wikipedia articles, however, can be edited by anybody at any time. Brooke also highlights the discussion section that each Wikipedia article has, which tracks all changes made to the page and allows editors to discuss these changes with each other, in hopes of determining and presenting the most accurate information at a given moment. Encyclopedias represent a more traditional form of written delivery – a physical, unchangeable book written by authoritative experts. On the other hand, Wikipedia represents a more modern form of delivery, in which readers may use the more flexible medium of Wikipedia to debate changes made to

pages. In this regard, the Wikipedia is an ongoing performance between editors, and the information presented on the site is the product of this dialogue.

Connected to delivery as performance is the concept of writerly and readerly texts. The terms “writerly” and “readerly” first appeared in Roland Barthes’ essay *S/Z*. Here, he refers to conventional texts as readerly, meaning that they reinforce the traditional divide between author and audience, the active producers and passive consumers of texts, respectively. Barthes adds that readerly texts are essentially products “that make up the enormous mass of our literature,” commodities to be consumed and digested (5). A text may have a meaning, but the reader, Barthes says, is left with one of two choices – to accept or reject it. Opposite to readerly texts are writerly ones, which Barthes defines as something that is at least in part produced by the reader:

The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (5)

With writerly texts, Barthes challenges his readers to imagine a type of text that is unlike the conventional, readerly literature that we are used to. Brooke’s comparison of print encyclopedias and Wikipedia is his application of Barthes’ idea of readerly and writerly texts – the encyclopedia is readerly while Wikipedia is writerly. Commenting on Barthes, Brooke says that Barthes argues against authors delivering “‘reality’ to a passively consuming reader through the medium of language” (177). Barthes alludes to a future in which the divide between readers and writers – the limited access to resources that allow one to publish his or her work – is removed and readers may easily become writers.

Although Barthes died in 1980, our modern age of user-generated content and peer-to-peer sharing realizes much of what he describes in *S/Z*. In *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*, Clay Shirky examines how digital culture has changed the way that people distribute information. He argues that innovations such as the internet have unleashed latent abilities in people that previously went unnoticed because there was no outlet for them in the pre-internet world. Additionally, Shirky discusses the way in which the internet breaks down the traditional barrier between writers and readers:

Every mode of communication that once had to rely on market pricing can now have an alternative that relies on open sharing...the old limitations of TV, radio, and print created a class of media professionals with privileged access to public speech, but public speech can now rely on wide participation (You have to be hired to be on the nightly news, but not to blog every night). (110)

In the traditional system, there are relatively few publishing authors producing texts for a massive audience that is often merely consuming these texts. The advent of the internet, however, opens things up for the population that could once only passively read texts written by a small class of experts with access to publishing and distribution resources. The internet has removed traditional barriers that people face in trying to get their work published and distributed. It costs money to print a copy of a book, but little, if not nothing, to produce and share a digital copy of a work. When the tools to publish and distribute are made available and easy to use, then people are all too happy to share things they find interesting with others.

People's willingness to create and share content themselves plays an important role in both greentext stories and the concept of rhetorical velocity. In their webtext, "Composing for Recomposition: Rhetorical Velocity and Delivery," Ridolfo and DeVoss define rhetorical velocity as "a conscious rhetorical concern for distance, travel, speed, and time, pertaining

specifically to theorizing instances of strategic appropriation by a third party.” The authors outline the process in which content creators compose a text in such a way that others may easily rewrite it. Ridolfo and DeVoss refer to an example of professional writing, a press release originally composed for and posted to the U.S. Department of Defense’s webpage on February 29, 2008, then disseminated three days later by the online news outlet *Jurist*. Through this process, users experience a wide range of peer-produced content, but rather than being passive consumers, a readerly audience, they are able to interact with the text by sharing or rewriting it.

## CHAPTER 4

### RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF GREENTEXTS ON 4CHAN

What follows is an application of the preceding ideas to greentext stories. The analysis section of this thesis comprises three sections spanning the life cycle of greentext stories from their first appearance on 4chan to their spread across the mainstream web, followed by either their co-opting by media outlets as readerly entertainment or their creative rewriting at the hands of a more writerly audience.

The first section, “Greentexts as Rhetorical Genres,” examines the exigency of greentext: a need for outsiders to identify with one another through narrative. The story to be analyzed is the first post in a thread entitled “who /monster/ here?” which was originally posted to 4chan’s /r9k/ board on October 8, 2015.

The second section, “Greentexts as Collective Digital Texts,” considers the how the nature of the genre changes as individual stories, which begin as smaller pieces of a larger thread, are shared across different media. This section will expand upon “who /monster/ here?” by examining later stories in the thread.

The third and final section, “Greentexts and Rhetorical Velocity,” looks at how individual greentexts can establish archetypes and subgenres and be rewritten creatively by other users after being shared across different media. The selections for analysis will include two “Tendies” stories, also from /r9k/. These samples will illustrate the way in which writers creatively recompose older stories to create new ones. Furthermore, this section will distinguish readerly

greentext, which is meant for passive consumption by a mainstream audience, and writerly greentext, which appeals to those who wish to creatively rewrite old stories.

### Greentext as a Rhetorical Genre

As mentioned earlier, Robot 9001, or /r9k/, is the board on 4chan from which greentext originated. Although Robot 9001 has no official theme, it seems to attract intelligent, albeit socially awkward, young men in their early to mid-twenties. /r9k/ users refer to themselves as “robots,” men dehumanized by the lack of meaningful relationships in their lives. In response, perhaps half-ironically and half-sincerely, they have simplistically divided the human population into two groups: themselves and their enemies, “normies.” The term “normie” refers to a conventional, well-adjusted person who is acclimated to mainstream culture. Robots also refer bitterly to “Chads” and “Stacies,” stereotypical popular jocks and cheerleaders, respectively, who have supposedly rejected robots from their cliques and forced them to seek refuge on the internet. Whether this narrative is accurate for all /r9k/ users or not, it is the social condition with which users play along. It is the exigence that causes them to write and share greentext on 4chan. Robots are outsiders, and they affirm this and identify with each other by sharing their stories.

Returning to Miller’s “Genre as Social Action,” greentext stories comprise a rhetorical genre because they are a response to a situation, or an exigence, as Bitzer would put it. 4chan has done much in the past decade to influence the popular culture of the internet. However, 4chan remains an outsider culture because the anonymity it offers to users encourages them to behave antisocially on the site without consequence. Thus, 4chan allows outsiders to identify with others

like them by sharing off-kilter and offensive content. Specifically, greentext stories allow writers to identify with their readers through shared narratives, and it is through this identification that 4chan users are able to create an insider culture from their outsider status. In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Kenneth Burke says, “In forming our personal identity, we spontaneously identify ourselves with family, nation, political, or cultural cause, church, and so on” (301). While any kind of writing on 4chan may be considered an exercise in constructing personal identity in spite of one’s anonymity, greentext stories add a narrative element to this. By writing a greentext story, a user reveals a certain part of him or herself to others.

Additionally, Ede and Lunsford’s “Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked” plays a role in this identification between writers and readers of greentext on 4chan. Ede and Lunsford identify two ways in which authors interact with their audiences. With audience addressed, a writer’s audience is a concrete reality; “knowledge of this audience’s attitudes, beliefs, and expectations is not only possible (via observation and analysis) but essential” (156). Audience invoked, on the other hand, describes an audience that that is “a construction of the writer,” adding that writers cannot know an audience in the same way a speaker might. Thus, rather than analyzing an audience and adapting the discourse to its needs (as with an addressed audience), an invoked audience requires the writer to employ cues: “semantic and syntactic resources of language...which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text” (160). The reader of greentext is often invoked by the writer, given the anonymity of 4chan users, and writers do so by employing cues such as phrases and abbreviations that are native to 4chan, which insiders will recognize, prompting their interaction.

The greentext sample selected for this section, “who /monster/ here?” begins with one of these cues to an imagined audience. The phrase “who /monster/ here?” (which in plain English might be rendered “Who is a monster here?”) follows a template that is often used to start greentext threads on 4chan: who /[blank]/ here? The Original Poster (OP) usually fills the blank with a noun or adjective; it is a call for anons to share stories of incidents in which they have best exemplified that quality. In “who /monster/ here?” the OP wants stories about times that users have committed monstrous, inhumane acts. The resulting thread is a surreal blend of comedy and tragedy, seemingly real confessional (sometimes unsettling) stories mixed in with obviously exaggerated but hilarious ones, and everything in between. What follows is the OP’s call for stories along with one of his or her own:

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Auto] This thread is archived 371 / 77 / 67 / 1

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58)

**Anonymous** 10/08/15(Thu)12:08:18 No.23107248 ▶ [>>23108390](#)  
[>>23108497](#) [>>23108834](#) [>>23108947](#) [>>23109653](#) [>>23110234](#) [>>23110347](#)  
[>>23110356](#) [>>23110799](#) [>>23111307](#) [>>23112022](#) [>>23113970](#) [>>23114963](#)  
[>>23116460](#) [>>23116918](#) [>>23117427](#) [>>23119189](#)

Who /monster/ here?

>tfw used to catch fish and stab their eyes out and let them go so they would never be healthy again  
 >tfw knock bird nest out of trees so they have to start all over again  
 >tfw throw rocks at old handicap people driving their electric wheelchairs down the sidewalk

1/61

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Abbreviations such as “tfw” may confuse outsiders. “Tfw” is short for “that feeling when,” which seasoned anons will recognize. This abbreviation acts as a cue for readers to

identify with the writer – specifically, a call for empathy. A similar abbreviation, “mfw,” or “my face when,” appears commonly in Greentext. “My face when” is used by the writer to describe his or her facial expression following the climax of the story. This is also a cue for identification, a call for the reader to imagine the writer’s reaction to his or her own story and to mirror that response, to recall a time in which they had a similar response to something that happened to them personally. It is at this point where the OP loses control of the thread and other users, switching roles from readers to writers, take over.

### Greentexts as Collective Digital Texts

As said earlier, it is easy to see 4chan as nothing more than mean-spirited anarchy. However, in light of Brooke’s work with the canon of Delivery, it is possible to see 4chan as something far more significant, perhaps even benevolent, specifically as the starting point of a new genre of internet-based storytelling. Rather than thinking of it as an insane free-for-all, it may be more helpful to think of 4chan as a campfire burning out in the dark middle of nowhere, around which people from all around, unknown to each other, gather to share stories, each author trying to outdo the previous one. What we have with greentext is essentially the basis for a narrative performance – from Brooke, who emphasizes “performance over transmission” in delivery of a text (181) – a dynamic delivery between many anonymous users to form a dialogue. It is just as important to examine an entire greentext thread as a single writerly text made of many small readerly ones. Although individual stories are written by single authors, a whole thread of Greentext stories amounts to a single work by many authors – a massive collaborative storytelling performance.

In “who /monster/ here?” for example, other users follow the OP’s lead and recount their own tales in which they supposedly commit monstrous acts. However, not everyone who posts in the thread is willing to believe what they read; one user accuses another of being an “edgelord,” one who postures excessively to appear edgy and tough. Despite the doubt of some readers, most of the stories in this thread seem horrific, but others are more humorous, like the following story about the author’s roommate’s cat, which forces the reader to seriously broaden his or her definition of the word “monster”:

>  **Anonymous** 10/08/15(Thu)14:09:58 No.23110234 ▶ [>>23110316](#) [>>23110333](#) [>>23111898](#) [>>23112572](#) [>>23112641](#)  
 File: [1425473440710.jpg](#) (201 KB, 470x595)

 [>>23107248 \(OP\)](#)

- >get home from wage slaving
- >had an awful day
- >roommate's cat comes up to me while I'm taking off my boots
- >jumps up beside me
- >I know what I must do
- >spend the next ten minutes giving the cat a belly rub and scratching her back

while she purrs

- >do this every day
- >roommate can't understand why the cat now likes me more

Here, the writer attempts to derail the thread by posting a tale that is related to the OP’s request for monstrous stories, but humorous rather than disturbing because it violates the readers’ expectation of the thread which has been established so far. This story stands out in the thread because it is different from the others, most of which are seemingly serious accounts of cruelty to animals and in some cases other people. It stands in opposition to most of the sincere-sounding stories on the thread and adds a sense of playfulness and genuine humor to the overall disturbing conversation.

Other stories in the thread are clearly fictional, such as the following mash-up of action movie clichés and /r9k/ revenge fantasies, a nerd getting back at all the stereotypical Chads and Stacies who have gone on to lead conventional, functional lives:

---

>>  **Anonymous** 10/08/15(Thu)14:07:01 No.23110155 ▶ [>>23110890](#)

- >driving to uni one day
  - >run over a roastie cunt and her stroller with chad jr inside
  - >pulled over because headlight was out from it
  - >cop walks up to window
  - >"good morning sir, did you know yo- BANG BANG
  - >drive off at mach 20
  - >slam through uni wall and run over another 20 people
  - >grab pkm
  - >"TICK TOCK NORMIES"
  - >"b-b-but that g-gun is b-banned ;A;
  - >screams drowned out by gunfire
  - >start placing explosives around the building
  - >hundreds of normies still on upper floor
  - >reach msd
  - >utter shitty one-liner
  - >detonate
  - >building collapses killing all survivors
  - >not done yet
  - >steal plane
  - >fly to pripyat
  - >steal nuclear components
  - >build suitcase nook from scratch
  - >place on plane
  - >fly to commiefomia
  - >nosedive into la
  - >entire west coast destroyed
  - >shockwave reaches mexico
  - >shifts tectonic plates and plunges the entire country underwater
  - >out of the ashes i rise again to repeat my work
  - >"nothin personnel kiddos"
  - >i venture into the ash valley that was once califomia in search of a vehicle
-

As noted earlier, the social environment of /r9k/ is dictated by its users' shared sense of perceived alienation from mainstream society. Although this user's power fantasy seems silly, an attempt to derail the thread, it can also be interpreted as a genuine yet controlled expression of rage and frustration. In "Identity Performance in Roleplaying Games," Danielle Nielsen describes a user called Bastal in an online forum critiquing the game *Dragon Age 2* for not catering the game more to his demographic of straight men. Nielsen points out that Bastal performed an identity in this forum, presenting himself "in relation to and more important than other gamers, women, and those in the LGBT community" (46). Applied to the second greentext shown in this section, the writer of that story is seeking identification from his fellow anons and alienation from the mainstream through his performance. Despite this story's humor, it holds fast to the OP's original prompt, a call for identification through shared stories. Through absurd humor and /r9k/ cues such as "Chad" and "normies," this story strikes a balance between thread derailment and identification through performance.

These two examples indicate how a Greentext thread is a writerly storytelling performance in which different users hijack a thread by sharing their own tales. When looking at a greentext thread as a storytelling performance by many users, it becomes clear that individual stories, which can stand on their own as complete texts, are also smaller parts of a much larger text. This is indicative of the death of the single, authoritative author. As previously mentioned, 4chan users have the option to post with a username if they so desire, but users rarely choose this option. In *Epic Win for Anonymous: How 4chan's Army Conquered the Web*, Cole Stryker highlights the main difference between sites like Facebook and Twitter and sites like 4chan. The

former two are social networking sites, which emphasize user visibility. As Stryker puts it, the emphasis is “on strong personalities rather than strong content”; on 4chan, however, “you’re only as respected as your last post” (276-7). Stryker draws attention to the fact that with online discourse, real names with real faces establish a hierarchy of users in dialogues. Well-known users have greater influence in a conversation and their words are given priority over others who perhaps have not been part of the community for as long. Pseudonymity and profile pictures might seem to be the solution to removing some obstacles to being heard that lesser known users face, but if usernames remain consistent among users, then authority still becomes attached to certain users.

The complete anonymity that 4chan allows its users is a game changer because it creates an egalitarian space in which people can share stories. This holds especially true in the face of mainstream social networking sites, which revolve around how many likes and shares a single user can get. 4chan offers users the ability to bump a thread to extend its lifespan before it is automatically deleted, but this is the only way that anons get in evaluating anything – there are no likes, shares, or anything else that might give glory to one user over another. On 4chan, all users are equal, and with greentext Stories specifically, all tales are equally valid.

When looking at a single greentext Story, one user’s contribution to a thread, no matter how long or short, it would seem to be a readerly text. Once a story is posted, there is nothing anybody can do to rewrite that story – not even the user who posted the story can go back and edit it. However, when one looks at an entire thread of greentext Stories, it becomes clear that a multitude of readerly texts work together to create one large writerly text. As seen with the “who /monster/ here?” thread, from the moment that the OP creates a call for stories from his fellow

anons, there is no telling which direction the thread can take. It is up to all users in the thread to construct the conversation by adding stories to the performance.

### Greentexts and Rhetorical Velocity

4chan lacks a permanent archive, meaning that all content uploaded to the site is eventually deleted. However, the life cycle of 4chan-based content, greentext stories included, does not end on 4chan. Thus, users take it upon themselves to preserve content that they find especially amusing or important. What follows is the spread of 4chan-based content to the mainstream web, for a broader audience to experience. The genre of greentext stories is in constant motion across different media, and users' experiences of stories change depending on the medium in which they appear. This section, "Greentexts and Rhetorical Velocity," examines two ways in which greentext stories can evolve outside 4chan. greentext can be shared on a site that encourages a readerly interaction with the text or one that encourages a writerly interaction.

From 4chan, greentext stories find their way to a variety of social networking sites, including Reddit's "r/greentext" page, Tumblr's "justgreentextthings," and Facebook's ">greentext." Additionally, BuzzFeed, a mainstream news outlet geared towards millennials, has published a couple of listicles showcasing notable greentext stories. Because 4chan threads can be very long, users who share greentext outside of 4chan tend to pick and choose their favorites from a thread while ignoring the rest. The relationship between 4chan and these more mainstream sites is significant because the two parties often clash when memes from 4chan appear on other sites. In "4chan Wages War on Tumblr," Adrian Chen points that 4chan users

often clash with Tumblr users when the latter appropriate 4chan's memes and culture. As noted previously, 4chan views itself as an insider culture made of outsiders, and when the mainstream takes hold of 4chan's memes, jokes, and other cultural tidbits, 4chan is quick to accuse these mainstream outlets of stealing their memes and, more severely, killing them; a meme is considered "dead" when it goes mainstream. What was once special and unique to a small tribe sitting around a communal campfire becomes co-opted as a sort of tourist attraction for outsiders, and what was once freely exchanged now becomes a vehicle for ad revenue, as seen with sites like BuzzFeed and the Roosevelts, which have each written brief articles about greentext stories.

BuzzFeed's article about greentext, "21 Stories from 4chan That Are Masterpieces of Literature," by Katie Notopoulos, is a listicle (an article presented as a numbered list, fleshed out with brief commentary on each entry) featuring, not surprisingly, twenty-one well-known greentext stories. Notopoulos begins the listicle by asking the reader to consider greentext stories as "heartrending works of literature that deserve our consideration and close reading" as opposed to "bawdy mutterings on a sordid site." Her tone here seems humorous, perhaps even sarcastic, given BuzzFeed's audience, 56% of which consists of young people ages 18-34, who have liberal and progressive leanings (Lella et al.). The content of the stories seems to reflect that. The selections are humorous but without any of the brazenly offensive content that might offend the sensibilities of the average BuzzFeed user – that is, content that is sexist, racist, homophobic, etc. Of course, the stories selected by Notopoulos are bawdy and sordid but contain nothing that will shock the average BuzzFeed reader or scare any advertisers away.

The Roosevelts' Joe Cucci's article is more detailed about his feelings toward 4chan and greentext. The title of his article, "24 Hilarious Greentext Tales of IT," is somewhat misleading;

rather than a list of unrelated stories, the ones Cucci shares in this article comprise a fairly long, episodic narrative that details one anon's various misadventures as an incompetent IT worker at his father's business. The article itself consists of a brief introduction to the featured greentext along with Cucci's true feelings about the stories and 4chan: "They are a common way to share all sorts of narratives, from the sublimely funny to the ridiculously disgusting. However, 4chan can be a scary place, so it's best to get these anecdotes filtered through other sites." He also assures the reader that the stories have been carefully read "to ensure that none of the extreme 4chan nonsense tagged along for the journey."

Both articles from BuzzFeed and the Roosevelts reveal how users outside of 4chan prune content from the site, allowing them to partake in this outsider culture while keeping their mainstream appeal. The spread of greentext to mainstream media outlets is a case of the genre becoming strictly readerly. Stories are separated from their original context as smaller parts of a writerly performance and repackaged for mainstream consumption. Although BuzzFeed and the Roosevelts both allow readers to respond to the article via comment sections, these readers form a more traditional audience that leaves the storytelling to experts. Ironically, the experts in this case are internet users from around the world, with no more or less authoritative voice than them. This fact, however, is less visible than what appears on a user's screen at a first glance: the seeming divide between author and audience. On mainstream web, where the reader is limited to contributing a like, a dislike, or a comment, greentext changes from the something that is living, dynamic, and unpredictable to something presented as-is.

Although a greentext story may become readerly on a site like BuzzFeed, it is important to note that the story wouldn't have made it to BuzzFeed if it wasn't writerly at some point. The

process by which writerly greentext becomes readerly signifies a half-completed cycle of rhetorical velocity; a user shares someone else's content but stops short of rewriting it, content with permitting others to view it passively. Readerly greentext can become writerly again if people pick up on certain themes and archetypes established in existing stories and write new stories based on them, giving rise to certain types of stories or subgenres of greentext. This reflects a more complete cycle of recomposition via rhetorical velocity.

Ridolfo and DeVoss's process of rhetorical velocity, the way in which users spread texts across different media and rewrite them, applies to some of the most successful internet memes. In *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media*, Michelle Zappavigna devotes a chapter to phrasal template memes, which she compares to "frames with slots that can be modified, allowing the meme to 'mutate' as users add their own elements to the slots. The 'casing' of a phrasal template is a kind of formulaic scaffolding, while items that occur in the slots are customizable" (106). As examples, she points to Russian Reversal jokes and the "Imma Let You Finish" meme inspired by Kanye West upstaging Taylor Swift at the 2009 MTV Music Video Awards. "Imma Let You Finish" was created accidentally in the sense that when West upstaged Swift he was not trying to compose a text that others could recompose creatively – people took it upon themselves to do that following the incident. On the other hand, there are memes which were designed to be recomposed by others. A recent example would be the promotional meme for the 2015 film *Straight Outta Compton*, which allowed users to add the name of their hometown (or anything else) to the film's logo: *Straight Outta* \_\_\_\_\_. Greentext stories as memes seem to follow the accidental design of "Imma Let You Finish." Because it is nearly impossible to determine the intent of a reader to have a story remixed in ways similar to a popular meme, perhaps attributing

the spread of greentext to rhetorical velocity is debatable. On the other hand, it is absurd for any writer to believe that something they post online will be theirs forever. Any text can be rewritten via rhetorical velocity, and anons should at least accept the possibility of something they post being discovered, shared, and possibly rewritten by another.

A notable recent example of this creative rewriting of greentext would be the tendies stories, which first appeared on 4chan's /r9k/ board in late 2014. Tendies stories are strange, hilarious, and obviously fictional accounts about an obese, autistic, twenty-something, basement-dwelling man-child – the stereotypical 4chan user – who demands “tendies” (chicken tenders) for every meal and terrorizes his parents when they refuse to give him what he wants. The two stories that follow were taken from an Imgur gallery titled “Fucking Normies,” which showcase a variety of tendies stories at the peak of the meme's popularity; this first story is the earliest dated image from that gallery:

File: [1407666439449.png](#) (24 KB, 954x539)



**Anonymous** 10/05/14(Sun)02:34:06 No.13896478 ▶ [>>13896495](#)  
[>>13896639](#) [>>13896778](#) [>>13896863](#) [>>13897114](#) [>>13897265](#)

>3 a.m.  
 >Hungry and want McDonalds but can't drive  
 >Decide to wake up my Mom to drive me  
 >"Honey it's 3 a.m. go back to bed, I'm not getting you McDonalds."  
 >Start to sob in their bedroom  
 >"YOU HATE ME DONT YOU!?" I scream  
 >I rip open her drawer and start throwing her clothes out

>She finally caves in and takes me  
 >I get chicken nuggets  
 >Silent the whole way there and back  
 >Finally get home, I'm in the back seat laying down  
 >"I need to lock the car, come inside"  
 >I whisper "No" and pretend I'm asleep  
 >"Jesus christ cut the shit anon"  
 >Tell her I want dad to carry me inside like a kid  
 >She tries to pull me out  
 >Scream and kick her in the stomach  
 >She storms off inside  
 >Mfw she actually got Dad, pissed as hell  
 >Mfw he and Mom both had to carry me out and into my bed

**Seriously, normalshits are pathetic**



will lead to him moving out. Good Boy Points has also gained enough popularity to earn an entry on Urban Dictionary, dated December 22, 2015.

To be fair, the popularity of tendies stories was short lived. The subgenre reached the height of its popularity in the first few weeks of January 2015 and petered out shortly afterward. Nevertheless, the tendies stories are significant because they demonstrate how the genre of greentext stories branches out and takes new shapes via rhetorical velocity. By repeating the same structures, archetypes, and language of parent stories, authors of greentext stories are able to make different stories out of their recompositions, however derivative they may be. Other subgenres of greentext, including “Shrek is Love, Shrek is Life,” spaghetti stories, and even acrostic stories, are dependent on creative recomposition for the spread and popularity that they have enjoyed. It is here where the greentext community collaborates in a much larger way than they do by simply sharing stories. With these creative rewritings of fictitious stories, they work together to create new memes as well as subgenres that have an effect on popular culture that spreads wider than either greentext or 4chan.

## CHAPTER 5

### COPYRIGHT AND AUTHOR-FUNCTION IN GREENTEXT

Rhetorical velocity offers users a new way to compose and deliver texts online. In *Electric Rhetoric*, Kathleen Welch, discussing composition textbooks, claims their major flaw is that “they treat the forms of electronic discourse not as issues that affect consciousness but as new sources of content” (158). Applying this lament to greentext, it is true that the genre gives us a new way to engage in anonymous confessional storytelling performances. However, the unique nature of greentext, stories without conventional authors that can be rewritten by anyone, should make us think differently about the ways in which literature can be created, disseminated, and rewritten in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In “Who Is Author?” Lev Manovich discusses at length the nature of authorship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While discussing the act of remixing, which he defines as a “fundamental reworking of a text,” Manovich says, “We are left an interesting paradox: while in the realm of commercial music remixing is officially accepted, in other cultural areas it is seen as violating the copyright and therefore as stealing.” Copyright laws prevent artists such as filmmakers, writers, and others from openly admitting that they remix existing works – such rewritings are often called parody or homage, but to take another’s work and own it would be considered plagiarism.

Devoss and Porter argue in “Why Napster Matters to Writing” that “copyright is – or should be – an essential question of delivery” (185). The way in which greentext is delivered through rhetorical velocity defies copyright because it defies traditional notions of authorship.

Although individual greentexts are written by individual authors, there are no names attached to stories. In “The Author-Function, The Genre-Function, and Rhetoric of Scholarly Webtexts,” Christopher Basgier discusses Foucault’s idea of the author-function, which “refers to the author’s name as it exists in relation to his or her works rather than simply to the individual named” (147). The author-function does not need to refer to a single person – it can “give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects—positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals” (Foucault 349).

Even if individual greentext stories could be attributed to specific persons, it would not matter because authors forfeit control over their stories the second they post them to 4chan. It may seem logical at this point to attribute the author-function of greentext stories to all anons involved in a greentext thread, but stopping there limits the scope of how many people are involved in the sharing, reposting, and rewriting of stories. Even journalists like Katie Notopulos and Joe Cucci should be included in the author-function of the greentext that they share in their articles. Of course, neither writer takes credit for writing any story. Yet by participating in its wider, ongoing composition through rhetorical velocity, Notopulos and Cucci can claim some ownership over the stories they share. Paradoxically, greentext stories belong to nobody and everybody all at once, free for anyone to repost or rewrite as they see fit.

Perhaps a more interesting case of greentext author-function is a book, *be me: a collection of greentexts* (all lowercase, reflecting the style of greentext stories), edited by Aapo Nikkanen. The book, published in 2015, consists of greentext stories that Nikkanen had been saving on his hard drive since 2010. In an interview with Sini Rinne-Kanto of *The Art Market*, Nikkanen describes how he came to discover greentext stories, followed by his desire to compile

his favorites in a book. One can't help but cringe when he describes receiving funding for his book proposal. Not only has he claimed author-function over the stories in his book, but he is also profiting from them. A logical line of questioning follows: How can one make money from the work of others? Why should a customer pay to read stories that are already online? Where is the line drawn between appropriation and plagiarism?

Unfortunately, none of these questions are addressed in the interview. It is a complicated matter. True, if no one owns greentext stories, then anyone can claim them for sharing and recomposition. But the issue of profiting from others' stories is not a new one. For instance, authors publish compilations of fables and fairy tales. These fables are often adapted and rewritten for a certain audience— rhetorical velocity at work again – while Nikkanen's book is simply old greentexts on paper. The answer to this may lie in the idea of open source, which Charles Lowe explains in "Copyright, Access and Digital Texts." Lowe describes open source licensed software, saying that "users are granted rights to see the source code, change it, make copies and redistribute either the original program or a modified version," adding that open source sharing should not discriminate against users or groups of users. Nikkanen's *be me* seems to fall into the category of "redistribute original program or modified version." It may not be illegal to sell anonymous greentexts, but would it be more respectable to rewrite them rather than just transcribe? At this moment, with similar greentext collections being published by others pseudonymously, this issue is a growing concern, and it will be interesting to see how this issue of author-function in greentext – and other types of internet fiction – plays out.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Greentext stories begin as narrative performances aimed at identification and reaffirmation of status as outsiders and, through rhetorical velocity, become either static texts for a broader, passive audience to experience (without the sordid bawdiness of 4chan) or something for users to creatively rewrite. In “Generalizing About Genre,” Amy Devitt emphasizes the importance of breaking free from the idea of genre as form and content and embracing a more dynamic idea of genre as an ever-evolving “patterning of human experience,” something that changes as our exigencies change (573). It is impossible to say for certain how the genre will change, but it seems most likely that change will occur when authors begin to write stories on media other than 4chan, where different rules of these media will alter the relationship between authors and readers.

One Tumblr blog, *justgreentextthings*, demonstrates the possibility of writerly greentext outside of 4chan. The experience of this *justgreentextthings* is mostly readerly: people can like and reblog (Tumblr’s term for sharing content), but they can also comment on posts, and this is where the relationship between greentext and Tumblr becomes interesting. In a post from September 10, 2015, the admin of *justgreentextthings* pointed out that ninety-nine stories had been added to the page and that something special should be done to commemorate the one-hundredth. The admin followed up by saying, “And for the momentous occasion of our 100th story, I figured we’d do something new. We’ll create our own. I’ll start and keep reblogging the

official thread. There are 363 of you guys [users following the page], surely we can make something rad.” The result was a collaboration between the page’s followers leading to a single silly story.

Despite the lack of bullet points or green font, the finished text heavily resembles the greentext on 4chan – a list of concise sentences riddled with abbreviations and parlance that only insiders will understand. The story itself makes no sense; halfway through, the narrator commits suicide, only to come to life again a few lines later, but the lack of continuity is not as important as the fact that this collaborative story reveals another way in which a greentext story can be written, with a single story being the product of many users rather than just one. A key implication of this greentext, however, is that stories can be attributed to authors through usernames; while the potential for collaboration on Tumblr increases, anonymity is removed. One can only imagine stories written on Facebook or Twitter, where real names of people would become attached to stories, resulting in a simpler author-function. On the other hand, greentext shared among close friends may allow for better identification, although this could result in smaller, more exclusive insider groups than the faceless, egalitarian group that anons enjoy on 4chan.

Thus, the genre of greentext Stories seems to be splitting off two ways in an evolutionary branch rather than moving toward one specific end. On one branch, greentext will stay writerly in places where users are freer to interact with the stories and contribute their own to the conversation. From this branch split many little twigs, each twig representing a subgenre or type of greentext story, which build on the language and tropes of previously written stories for creative rewritings. On the other branch, greentext is becoming commoditized as it gains

mainstream popularity on sites like BuzzFeed and the Roosevelts. On these sites, greentext is presented merely as an artifact, something more like the traditional readerly text that only a certain class of professionals has the means and privilege to create. Additionally, there are books like Aapo Nikkanen's *be me*, a very readerly delivery of these stories which raises questions of how far one can go in appropriating another's work. Building on this issue of copyright and authorship that greentext presents, it will be interesting to see how the genre might change in regards to issues like net neutrality. In "Protecting Net Neutrality and the Infrastructure of Internet Delivery," Heidi McKee questions whether, in 20 years, the internet will remain "an open network that most can write and read from" or "a locked-down media, controlled primarily by large for-profit corporations or authoritarian governments." With the growing popularity of greentext, it is likely that more will try to profess authorial ownership of texts that they write, reducing the creativity that has gotten the genre where it is today. Should this happen, greentext will become conventionally readerly.

At the beginning of this thesis, I said that the spread of greentext across different media – into different contexts and situations – is the genre's defining trait. Because greentext can be shared freely, without ties to original authors, many users can interact with it creatively. Although it seems logical that stories would become less creative if authors co-opt the genre, it is unlikely that creative rewrites of online stories would stop. More specifically, it is difficult to imagine a future in which greentext is either purely writerly or readerly. Certainly not all who read greentext also write it; some are content to read it passively. On a final note, this thesis does not mean to suggest a natural progression in literature from readerly to writerly. Although the internet has enabled authors to produce more writerly texts, readerly ones still exist, and indeed

have their time and place. As long as greentext remains online, free for users to share, rewrite, or simply read, then perhaps a balance between writerly and readerly greentext stories can exist.

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