

Persuasive Physical Computing: A Review of David M. Rieder's *Suasive Iterations: Rhetoric, Writing, & Physical Computing*

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Abstract

Suasive Iterations seeks to expand the repertoire of physical computing, rhetoric, and digital humanities research in an age of pervasive technology and virtual reality. The book provides a collection of theoretical frameworks with which digital humanists can craft projects to evert the virtual and the real towards suasive ends. Rieder argues that digital rhetors and authors should seek to use the affordances of technology to bring the virtual and the real together to create reality altering experiences that are persuasive and transductive. This book is an invaluable tool for those new to the digital humanities as well as experienced scholars as it provides strong theoretical guidance as well as project ideas to promote research in the field.

In a digital age of virtual reality, augmented reality, and pervasive computing technologies, the lines between the virtual and the real have been blurred, resulting in typified virtual reality experiences — that is, users know what to expect when using these media. For David M. Rieder, that marks a point in society where digital rhetors and authors should seek to “evert reality” and “creatively bend the conventional experience of reality toward some suasive end” [Rieder 2017, 5]. In *Suasive Iterations: Rhetoric, Writing, and Physical Computing*, Rieder argues that for digital rhetors and authors to persuade and move audiences they should not be seeking to fashion virtuality as reality; rather, they should be seeking to combine the two in novel ways, into what he calls an eversion of reality, a transductive process where the line between the “virtual and the real are folded together”, and the analog is blurred as a means of altering an audience’s reality [Rieder 2017, 11]. Thus, Rieder aims to deliver succinct methodologies for designing iterations of suasive physical computing projects.

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Suasive Iterations serves as a succinct reader and springboard for how digital humanists should begin research in the fields of physical computing and rhetoric and composition. Rieder’s text serves as a grand contribution to the digital humanities in that it moves and challenges the field towards considering the potential for physical computing research and empirical projects. Each chapter consists of a theoretical framework within which Rieder seeks to explore how rhetorical theory and physical computing can cooperate towards a means of persuasion in a post-PC era. Following each chapter is sub-chapter dedicated to a physical computing project which demonstrates the theoretical framework explored in the previous chapter. Organizing the book in this manner bolsters its argument, as each sub-chapter immediately puts theory into practice, providing a concrete application for the theories discussed.

2

In addition to the efficient chapter design, a visual aid is present by way of images. Rieder includes images of devices such as circuit boards and wiring, which help to inform readers who may be unfamiliar with the technology. These images are invaluable when Rieder begins to discuss the features of a particular piece of machinery as they make the text and the concepts therein feel accessible and the technology less foreign. As such, *Suasive Iterations* serves as an excellent text for new media courses at the upper-undergraduate level as well as all levels of graduate courses — including MA and Ph.D. classes. Classes seeking to expose students to digital rhetoric, computers and composition, or physical computing and writing will find this text useful, particularly because of the research ideas and projects included in the sub-chapters which provide students with applications to the theory discussed, processes for designing research projects, and ideas for further research.

3

The first chapter, “For/Get the Digital and (Ditch the Umbrella)”, opens with Rieder’s appraisal of the art project “Rain Room” as it exemplifies the hybrid realities he argues for. Rieder introduces technologies such as passive infrared motion sensors, actuators, and slide potentiometers, believing that these technologies can be employed for rhetorical purposes in physical computing projects. Rieder believes technology contains the power to blur virtual and reality, leading to a change in one’s view of reality. The crux of this chapter lies in his presentation of Dan O’Sullivan and Tom Igoe’s term transduction: “the process by which action or change is produced, and a reality-altering, everted experience is its outcome” [Rieder 2017, 15]. Rieder uses this term in conjunction with an extension of Lloyd Bitzer’s theory of the rhetorical situation — through Kenneth Burke’s concept of casuistic stretching — to include physical computing environments and adopts Lawrence C. Rosenfield’s understanding of epideictic rhetoric as more than mere ceremonial appraisal but a celebration or appreciation of being. Rieder explains that folding (everting) the virtual into the real is “an act of persuasion associated with epideictic” because it is an “event that illuminates or conceals some truth for its audience” [Rieder 2017, 19].

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In Chapter Two, “Transduction and Allegorized Style”, Rieder uses Richard Lanham’s analysis of prose to discuss how digital rhetors can allegorize data towards a suasive end. A suasive end, in this respect, refers to a reality-altering incident which utilizes “some of the affordances of the virtual” [Rieder 2017, 5]. Rieder adopts Lanham’s understanding of allegorized style to mean when content rises above its associated purpose or the argument it was intended for. Rieder provides examples of digital projects such as Laurence Sterne’s use of grammatical symbols and typographical experiments. Concepts of stylistic invention, magical and scientific logic, and computational thought are brought in to construct a theoretical foundation for what he calls “A Multi-Stage, Recursive Process of Invention”, which is a seven-step process for designing a project with which data can be collected and allegorized towards a suasive end.

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Chapter Three, “Onto-Allegories for the ‘Great Outdoors’”, shows Rieder arguing against scholars such as John Wieser, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Adams Sherman Hill, the latter of whom calls for an era of ubiquitous computing— technologies that are invisible and less attention-grabbing. Rieder believes that these ideas are inherently anti-rhetorical and shows how rhetors should be seeking to grab the attention of audiences through rhetorical means. In an age of information, Rieder acknowledges that attention has become the new scarce commodity. In response, he argues that to compete with the values of calm computing digital rhetors should aim to compose projects that take on what he calls an “onto-allegorical approach”, a combination of Lanham and Ian Bogost’s perspectives on attention and reality [Rieder 2017, 86].

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In Chapter Four, “Plumbing the Paradoxical Depths”, Rieder argues for a revival of the canon of delivery and a return to embodied expressions such as gesture, posture, and corporeal experiences. Using scholars such as Adam Kendon, Ben McCorkle, and José Gil, Rieder supplants the understanding of gesture and the nature of the body in rhetoric. Rieder privileges the Xbox Kinect’s open platform system as an invaluable tool for such revival and goes into detail as to how this machine makes real-time transduction possible. Applying Deleuzian notions of the space-time of bodies, Rieder uplifts the Natural User Interface that the Kinect establishes as a means of capturing and delivering an everted bodily experience to audiences in a transductive manner. The Kinect provides an opportunity to capture paradoxically flat, raw data, and Rieder elaborates on how it can be transduced to deliver a new, everted reality to participants.

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In what might be his most compelling chapter, “A Call for Distant (Transductive) Writing”, Rieder argues for an approach to writing that removes the obligation to use alphabetical symbols as a means of conveying meaning and instead relies on generated surface-lines to express transduced allegorized meaning. He calls this “distant writing”, an extension of Franco Moretti’s term *distant reading* [Rieder 2017, 127]. For Rieder, distant writing represents a mode of writing which removes the restraint of speech and phonetic thought as the sole method of conveyance and argument. Postulating the idea of line-making practices such as tracing, drawing, and etching as methods of distant writing, Rieder supplants the idea that writing represents speech using linguists such as Roy Harris and Tim Ingold, emphasizing the transductive potential for line-making as rhetorical practice.

8

In the final chapter, “After the Bookish Era of the PC”, Rieder leaves readers with his hope for the future, of digital rhetors and distant writers allegorizing data for transductive purposes. Rieder reflects on the technological relationship in Spike Jonze’s film *Her* and how it relates to the “new post-PC era” and “the post-human-reality” we are headed

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towards [Rieder 2017, 161]. He encourages scholars in the field to take a chance at creating a physical computing project, expressing hope that a day may come when such projects can be recognized as “stand-alone” scholarship and that more digital rhetors and authors would seek to explore the available means of persuasion in physical computing.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Rieder’s text is its insistence on exploration and experimentation. His seven-step recursive process of invention presents an invaluable heuristic of sorts with which digital rhetors can explore the limitations and potential of their physical computing projects. Another major strength is its accessibility and descriptive writing style. Rieder’s concision and clarity strengthen his argument as readers will find little trouble grasping his concepts. There is, however, an apparent limitation to his text. While not entirely unheard of, his stacked abstractions make for a very broad and open-ended scope. Because the scope is so broad and designed from the theorists he has chosen, readers may find themselves feeling limited by his abstractions to then apply his research methods.

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Suasive Iterations is a strong text in that it urges digital humanists to consider the potentialities of physical computing as a means of suasive, rhetorical persuasion. To that end, Rieder negotiates the limits of writing and rhetoric and pushes them into the field of physical computing, urging interdisciplinary research and projects. The organization of the text makes for an accessible read for new scholars looking to find a conversation to join and the means with which to turn their inventive ideas into research endeavors and projects. As such, this text marks a pivotal turn for the digital humanities, documenting prospective change in a field — rhetoric and composition — which urges readers to explore and desire to capitalize on the innovative nature of technology through data-driven, empirical research.

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Works Cited

Rieder 2017 Rieder, D. *Suasive Iterations: Rhetoric, Writing, & Physical Computing*. South Carolina: Parlor Press (2017).