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Blogging on Paper:

An Analysis of the Semiotic Domains of *Confessions of a Boyfriend Stealer*

The book *Confessions of a Boyfriend Stealer* can only be purely thought of as a book in a physical sense. It has pages, a front cover and a back cover, and is read from beginning to end. The format of this book, however, takes on the guise of entirely different medium: a blog. Blogs are short for weblog, a virtual diary housed in a website in which the author posts individual entries for the rest of the internet to see and respond to. They are a relatively new media that have grown in popularity among much of the internet community. Books and blogs share a few similarities, such as using words to convey the author's thoughts, but for the most part the two have very different semiotic domains. Semiotic domains are, as defined by James Paul Gee, "any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities to communicate distinctive types of meanings" (Gee 18). It is the difference in the semiotic domains of blogs and books that makes *Confessions*, a book that mimics a blog, so unique.

Books have been present in human society for thousands of years and will be for many more. In the semiotic domain of books, there are several sub-categories, or genres. Most of these genres share content common in books, such as titles, proper punctuation, and proper spelling. The producers of books are authors, and in order to allow their book to be mass produced, they have to get their book published. All of this fits into what Gee calls an internal design grammar for books. This design grammar departs from that of an internet

blog, in which the author is the only editor and publishing is as easy as clicking on a mouse. This difference is part of what makes the semiotic domains of a book and a blog so different.

The book begins in a manner that seems much more fitting on a computer. Robynn Clairday introduces her main character through the use of a personal profile. This is a novel idea to get the reader accustomed to a character and certainly fits in with the semiotic domain of a blog. Profiles such as the one in *Confessions* are utilized in blogs because of the ease in which it presents background information about the author. In the domain of book-based first-person narratives, an author would usually present background information about the narrator by revealing personal facts only as the story required them. The placement of a blog-style profile on the first page is a strong signal as to how the author wants the book to be read: in the domain of a blog.

Communication on the internet is commonly associated with media such as instant messengers, e-mail, forums, and blogs. All of these media require the use of a keyboard, and are generally thought of as informal compared to handwritten correspondence. The inclusion of this style of writing has led to a new type of literacy used almost exclusively on the internet. Words are shortened in what has been named "l33t speak" which can condense long messages into just a few letters. Formalities such as proper punctuation have also been thrown out in the interest of less key strokes. While the main body of *Confessions* does not usually share this similarity with blogs, the responses at the end of each chapter do.

The simulated responses present in *Confessions* are another integral part of what makes the book share semiotic domains with a blog. Normally, readers of a blogger's work can openly reply and express their reaction to an entry. This allows for a third-party's point of view on a particular topic, which can in turn allow for better understanding of the topic. While *Confessions* is not actually available to respond to online, the author, Robynn

Clairday, invents separate entities from her narrator, Genesis, for the sole purpose of responding to her blog entries. These entries allow the reader to gain another perspective on Genesis' confessions. Genesis gets the chance to respond to the statements left on her last blog post and often does before the start of a new entry. Those who have affinity with the social practice of blogging can quickly take to this method even though they are not staring at a computer screen.

The target audience of the book appears to be that of high school to college-aged females (at least judging by the cover). It is not hard to visualize that a majority of that audience is at least partially familiar with the internet and blogs in particular. The internet's effect on social interaction is a wide one which can be seen represented in almost all other types of media. The literacy of blogs does not differ extensively from the literacy of most other forms of internet communication, and an affinity for one can facilitate the affinity for another.

In order to further give the impression that the reader is scrolling down a webpage instead of turning pages, the author of *Confessions* includes underlined web page links when mention of a related product, such as M&M's or IHOP. These links serve no purpose other than to portray similar elements with a blog, in which web links are often utilized to further expand the topic being discussed. This is another example of the internal views the author has on the domain of blogs and how she incorporated it into her writing. A person outside the affinity group of blogs would think that the links present in *Confessions* were no more than blatant advertising. Those *in* the affinity group for a blog would recognize the links and would be able to read them as they were intended. Web links are also present at the beginning of each chapter. These refer to other fictional parts of the blog such as pictures or a calendar. The font of these links (and some of the headers) is also somewhat important, as it seems to take on an almost digital quality. As mentioned before, the affinity for such content is already present in a large part of the book's target audience.

Pictures are also present at the beginning of each entry, which are placed above the aforementioned links. These pictures include: a camera, two hearts being added together, a shirt and tie, a key, and a television. There is no explanation within the content of the book regarding what these pictures symbolize or if they mean anything at all. It is up to the reader to decide. While pictures are not often thought of as being directly related to blogs, their domains can be traced back to the imagery commonly used on the internet or even in other books. The pictures themselves seem to convey a sense of digital art, as they are drawn pixel by pixel much as a computer graphic would be. This tie-in with digital imagery is yet another example of the author trying to convince the reader that they are in a real blog.

It is not surprising that the author goes to the trouble of adding things like web links, pictures, or even bad punctuation in her book, for convincing someone that a book is anything but is not easy to maintain. The compatibility between these two types of media lies in the fact that blogs are derived from books (or more specifically, journals), even though the jump from paper to the computer was a long one. *Confessions* proves that the domains of blogs and books can be effectively crossed without losing much of what makes each unique. It is clear, however, that the author is reaching more forcefully to the affinity group of blogs. The domain of books is so inclusive that one only needs to be presented with a book in a physical sense to be familiar with it. Blogs, while steadily gaining popularity, have a much smaller affinity group. Content such as the message boards would come off as foreign to many people, even though they provide extra story elements and a brand new perspective on the confession of the narrator to those who can read them correctly. They serve to reel the reader into the story in a manner that only a blog could produce. The book's content is certainly that which could appeal to a young, internet savvy audience and the cover and title seems to confirm it. *Confessions* is a new type of beast in

that the book is still a book no matter how you look at it, but yet it can only be truly *read* by the affinity group of a blog.

Works Cited

Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.