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### Reviving the undead book

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# BOOK REVIEW

## REVIVING THE UNDEAD BOOK

Janneke Adema

### **Planned Obsolescence. Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy**

KATHLEEN FITZPATRICK

New York, New York University Press, 2011

vii + 245 pp., ISBN 978-0-8147-2788-1, \$23 pbk

*Planned Obsolescence* is foremost a work of advocacy. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Director of Scholarly Communication at the Modern Language Association and Professor of English at New York University (NYU), is on a mission: to save scholarly (book) publishing; to alter the processes of knowledge production; and to direct academia as a whole towards a digital future. *Planned Obsolescence* is not just a print-on-paper argument, though; it is an extended digital project and scholarly network.

It began with Fitzpatrick's blog by the same name, finding its extension in *MediaCommons*, a scholarly publishing community that Fitzpatrick co-established to enable the building of networks and collaborations among media scholars. She used *MediaCommons Press*, a digital text platform and publishing experiment from *MediaCommons*, to openly review the manuscript of *Planned Obsolescence*. Adopting *CommentPress* software – a WordPress plugin that allows comments to be made next to specific paragraphs of text – the draft was made available online in 2009 to potential reviewers and commentators (alongside a traditional peer review process by NYU Press). With this experiment in 'peer-to-peer reviewing', Fitzpatrick not only wanted to critique existing forms of peer review and examine alternative ones, but she also wanted to experiment with creating an online community, promoting the values of collaboration and interactivity that form the basis of the argument of her book. *Planned Obsolescence* explores what the possibilities of digital tools, technologies and practices are to enhance and promote conversations around (long-form) texts. It also examines in what way these digital affordances are, perhaps, able to alleviate the crisis in academic publishing, and to save the scholarly monograph from what Fitzpatrick calls its zombie status: threatened with obsolescence, no longer viable or sustainable, though still required for tenure and promotion (i.e. *undead*). Fitzpatrick asks how we can align digital practices and the current system of tenure and promotion more closely, to get new

modes of publication more broadly accepted within academia. What do new technologies have to offer us? How can they potentially change the processes of knowledge production?

In attempting to answer these questions, Fitzpatrick focuses on five main themes, which each make up one of the chapters of the book: peer review, authorship, texts and hypertexts, preservation, and the university and scholarly publishing. For Fitzpatrick, these themes are all intimately linked: rethinking peer review not only has consequences for the way we establish scholarly quality, but also for how we think about, for instance, authorship and scholarly texts. Through rethinking these different aspects of scholarly communication, Fitzpatrick wants to emphasize that publishing should be seen as a *process* facilitating knowledge creation, instead of as a system focused on the Fordist production of publishable end products. Her vision for scholarship and publishing is community-oriented, multimodal, open and gift economy-driven. She argues that the affordances of the Net have the potential to increase the interaction of readers with networked texts and new forms of scholarship.

In her discussion of the problems of peer review in the first chapter, Fitzpatrick follows Mario Biagioli in envisioning it foremost as a disciplinary technology. The system of peer review we use is more oriented towards credentialing, gatekeeping and policing the limits of what is allowed, research-wise, than it is about establishing the quality of a work. Fitzpatrick makes the argument for a post-publication filtering system, where works are first developed and improved through open peer-to-peer review processes that enable feedback and discussion amongst scholars. The best works then get selected for ‘formal’ publication. Here, peer review becomes more like a conversation in which the author becomes a vital part of the discussion around the establishment of quality.

Fitzpatrick’s critique of authorship in chapter two is foremost a critique of the myth of individuality and originality that conventional notions of authorship promote. Forms of processual, collective and curatorial authorship would again acknowledge the collaborative nature of scholarship, foregrounding the ongoing conversation that fosters it. In chapter three, Fitzpatrick analyses the possibilities of going beyond authorship in digital writing by exploring a variety of examples of digital scholarship and experimental publishing that complicate it – by promoting commenting, linking, remixing, cutting and versioning – and that emphasize how texts are neither discrete nor static. She argues that our critique of authorship has remained mostly theoretical, with few practical applications. Fitzpatrick, however, clearly strengthens her theoretical argument by experimenting with an online publishing system intended to promote community values. As she argues in the penultimate chapter, the right community structures are also essential when it comes to preservation. Fitzpatrick’s community-oriented preservation strategy utilizes open standards and open-source software to build digital libraries and provide access to metadata. As she states, ‘long-term solutions to problems of

preserving digital scholarly content (...) will of necessity be social in origin' (152).

The final chapter on the political economy of knowledge production focuses on the crisis in academic publishing. While the current system of scholarly monograph publishing is no longer economically sustainable, the viability of alternative, digital publishing models is of the utmost importance as this forms the basis for any further change. Fitzpatrick argues for a movement towards open-access presses, in an effort to promote conversational structures around texts and to open up distribution of scholarly works. Publishing should be a central mission of the university again, she argues, and should be funded as an essential infrastructure. By reconnecting with the broader university community, the university press will be drawn more directly into the work of the university and its library.

Clearly, this book review continues the conversation around *Planned Obsolescence*. Because it appears in a closed-access journal, however, the conversation might not be as open as Fitzpatrick would want it to be. Yet, the same might also be said about her final form of publication, the printed and bound paper book published by NYU Press. It is a shame that this version is not openly available, and that it still functions as a sort of closure to the text – as the end product and the version of record – as well as to the conversation; a conversation that in many ways has been strongly directed by Fitzpatrick. By clearly curating and taking responsibility for the project – albeit in a very hospitable, open and collaborative way – is she not preserving and perhaps even enhancing individual authorship for a digital age? The question then remains whether the digital alternatives she proposes in *Planned Obsolescence* foster substantive change. Is Fitzpatrick foregrounding collaboration and co-authorship, or has she created a tool that very carefully distinguishes (and gathers and preserves) her authorial ideas from those of her collaborators? *Planned Obsolescence* is very much Fitzpatrick's work, and although she complicates existing print-based practices, she is not necessarily critiquing them as fully as she could. And the same can be said about her assessment of the potential of digital practices. Although Fitzpatrick, for instance, does shortly mention problems of conformity, groupthink and bias in online communal knowledge production, it would have been helpful if she had provided a more thorough analysis of how open systems of discussion and review can enable dissent and battle these what she calls 'oppressive aspects of the consensus model of community' (42–43). Will the networked community values she promotes in her book not also have the potential to restrict, police and structure scholarship by becoming hegemonic forces? Fitzpatrick's focus throughout the book is on making digital work more acceptable within academia. Some more fundamental questioning of the way the academic system gets replicated in digital practices, and a more sustained critique of the conformist potential of digital tools and practices, would have been welcome.

This criticism notwithstanding, Fitzpatrick should be lauded for starting to make important steps in *Planned Obsolescence* – both theoretically and practically – towards reconsidering the present scholarly publishing and communication system. By reflecting on alternative cut-off points for publication, she tries to envision more beneficial ways to make the conversation of scholarship happen. And it is these experimental practices that, without doubt, should inspire us to push even further. The implications of *Planned Obsolescence* for cultural studies as a field, and for the specific research practices and publishing economies that enable its knowledge production, thus seem clear. Especially, if we consider cultural studies' specific attachment to pedagogy and to the open, public dissemination of research, the question should be: can we really extend this conversation towards the wider society if we keep it closed off within a subscription and print-based publication system, for instance, within journals such as *Cultural Studies*? In which ways do we have the responsibility as scholars to not only rethink, critique and intervene in cultural practices to promote difference and social justice *out there*, but to also examine our own internal practices of doing research and the dissemination of the results thereof? Cultural studies practitioners will be in a good position to carry on the conversation that Fitzpatrick started: by not only experimenting with alternative, more inclusive forms of research production and publication; but also by exploring the potential limits of open forms of publication and communal knowledge production.

### Notes on contributor

**Janneke Adema** is a research fellow Digital Media at Coventry University where she is also writing her Ph.D. dissertation on the future of the scholarly book.

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