The Hacker and the Hawker: Networked Identity in the Science Fiction and Blogging of Cory Doctorow

Robert P. Fletcher

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, rfletcher@wcupa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/eng_facpub

Part of the Literature in English, North America Commons

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wcressler@wcupa.edu.
Robert P. Fletcher

The Hacker and the Hawker: Networked Identity in the Science Fiction and Blogging of Cory Doctorow

Introduction. In 1842 Charles Dickens undertook something of a book promotion tour in America during which, according to Peter Ackroyd,

he emphasized the democratic spirit of his writings, as if uniting himself with his audience, and then launched into a plea for international copyright, using the spectre of a broken and exhausted Walter Scott as an example of a writer who was unjustly deprived of his rightful income. (350)

Despite invoking the ghost of the most popular novelist to precede him, Dickens’s attempt to bring the Americans around to a sense of fair play—while not appearing too materialistic—brought him a lot of grief. Not only were his criticisms poorly received in the press, but his next novel, Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-44), also suffered disappointing sales on both sides of the Atlantic.

Fast forward to 2008. Another novelist with the initials C.D. is lecturing and writing about democracy, culture, and copyright on both sides of the Atlantic, but this time the writer is arguing against the extension of copyright owners’ rights over texts through a revision in the law and warning of the use of digital technology by corporations to exercise that centralized control. For several years Canadian sf novelist Cory Doctorow spoke against the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) and Digital Rights Management (DRM) software as a representative of the Electronic Frontier Foundation; in 2007 he taught a graduate course about the history of copyright at the University of Southern California; and both on a popular blog, <boingboing.net>, and in print publications such as The Guardian, he has criticized the shift in focus of copyright law—from a measure that protected the rights of such authors as Dickens to fair compensation to one that guards the exclusive control exercised over cultural products by moneyed corporations for ever longer periods of time.¹

Like Dickens’s competing roles as artist, democrat, and businessman, Doctorow’s different activities as artist, advocate, and entrepreneur tell us something about his novels’ relations to changing modes of cultural production and to the social organization they entail. As the nineteenth-century realist’s campaign for international copyright regulation speaks to what N.N. Feltes, in Modes of Production of Victorian Novels (1986), termed the development of “the commodity-text of the capitalist literary mode of production” (9), so does the twenty-first-century sf novelist’s efforts to limit corporate control over intellectual property speak to the developing contradictions at work when the technology enhancing the dissemination of information also fosters a heightened economic conflict over ownership and access. Even more than Dickens, Doctorow finds himself trying to balance his role as popular champion against his own interests as entrepreneur. Whether we are discussing his novels or his own mediated
identity, we can take Doctorow as a harbinger of the novelist in a networked world. If my connection between Dickens and Doctorow seems overblown given the limited, if growing, popularity of the latter as a novelist or celebrity, Doctorow’s texts may nevertheless be analogous to Dickens’s early novel, The Pickwick Papers (1836), in how they preview the shape of things to come in the production and dissemination of novels.

In the remainder of this essay, I will show how an overriding concern with open access has come to dominate his fiction. This is especially true of his recent work, such as the stories that comprise the collection Overclocked (2007) and the young-adult novel Little Brother (2008), fictions that explicitly take the social control of networked identities as their primary, indeed their pedagogical, subject. Just as much of what made Dickens innovative was already present in Pickwick, however, I will argue that the conflicts of Doctorow’s most recent work were already the focus of his less didactic first novel, Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom (2003).

The Blogger as Novelist and the Work as Assemblage. In a February 2008 Guardian column, Doctorow discussed how, in the past few decades, the idea of copyright has morphed into the notion of “intellectual property”:  

Fundamentally, the stuff we call “intellectual property” is just knowledge—ideas, words, tunes, blueprints, identifiers, secrets, databases. This stuff is similar to property in some ways: it can be valuable, and sometimes you need to invest a lot of money and labour into its development to realise that value.... But it is also dissimilar from property in equally important ways. Most of all, it is not inherently “exclusive.” If you trespass on my flat, I can throw you out (exclude you from my home). If you steal my car, I can take it back (exclude you from my car). But once you know my song, once you read my book, once you see my movie, it leaves my control. Short of a round of electroconvulsive therapy, I can’t get you to un-know the sentences you’ve just read here. (“‘Intellectual Property’”; emphasis in original)  

As a member of <boingboing.net>, Doctorow blogs on diverse topics, but one of the most consistent is this battle against overly restrictive copyright and advocacy instead of what has been termed “copyleft,” a form of licensing that allows to differing degrees the non-profit use or even modification of various media products. Doctorow licenses his texts through Creative Commons, which is related to the open-source software movement. Most recently, he has been part of the fight against the adoption of a clone of the DMCA in Canada. As a blogger, Doctorow’s own “augmented” identity depends on a postmodern, networked, cut-and-paste textual practice, especially in what he terms his “knowledge grazing”:  

I consume, digest, and excrete information for a living.... [M]y success depends on my ability to cite and connect disparate factoids at just the right moment.... Being deprived of my blog right now would be akin to suffering extensive brain-damage. Huge swaths of acquired knowledge would simply vanish. (“My Blog”)  

In such a confession of dependency on the Internet, one which more and more of the populace might be inclined to make these days, lurks a dual recognition of the intertextuality and materiality of knowledge on the one hand and the
interdependency of machine and human in a system on the other—both are subjects that inform the conflicts of his science fiction.

In her various works on electronic textuality and so-called posthuman identity, N. Katherine Hayles emphasizes just such a link between the material specificity of texts and concerns about embodiment (How We Became, passim; My Mother 144). She analyzes, for example, how Shelley Jackson’s Patchwork Girl (1995), a hypertext novel that revises Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), unearthed not only the supposedly discarded parts of the original story, but also “those aspects of textual production that were suppressed in the eighteenth century to make the literary work an immaterial intellectual property,” thereby valorizing the “fetishized unique imagination” of the (male) Romantic artist (My Mother 147). According to Hayles, electronic texts such as Jackson’s resurrect a concept of the “Work as Assemblage, a cluster of related texts that quote, comment upon, amplify, and otherwise intermediate one another” (105). The author of the hyperlinked text is also transformed from bounded, unique individual into a function (à la Foucault) or a dispersed, patchworked, or versioned subject akin to Doctorow’s network-dependent blogger. In “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Panopticon,” while considering the significance of Google’s search technology and archival practices, Doctorow again acknowledges the patchworked subjectivity of the blogger and winds up musing about the nature of material embodied existence and the traces left by writing. The bulkiness of print storage has always forced archivists to be selective about what gets saved, but with the cheap and compact storage of “words-as-bytes,” nothing need be forgotten:

This is a good thing, but it’s also a pain in the ass. Our embarrassing excesses, drunken rants, typos and brain farts and flames no longer vanish into our sub-consciouses [sic], but rather hang around like embarrassing relatives, undeniably ours, with us forever.

There’s an upside, of course. The enduring presence of our publicly stated positions acts as an accountability system, making us own up to our errors and perhaps encouraging us to think carefully before putting our fingers on our keyboards. (“How I Learned”)

If, as he puts it, “in a world of degradable storage, replicating copies is the surest way to guarantee longevity” (“How I Learned”), it is also a way to make sure errors persist (perhaps even multiply, as bibliographers rue) and thereby bring themselves to our attention. The most perfect copy is not the same as the original, and that can be a good thing. Multiple copies means multiple versions, which means different texts to read and different perspectives on experience, which means a less certain but a richer understanding, even if we are bereft of an Ur-text.

These valuable traces of difference are evidence of what Gray Kochhar-Lindgren, borrowing from Antonio Negri, calls spectrality, an uncanny “force that displaces certainties” in a world of “technologies,” Kochhar-Lindgren’s term for the dream of a world idealized through technology (2). The ghost and the specter are signifiers of a “radical Unheimlich” (2), “phantom traces like electron shadows” (3), or figures for an element of the “incalculable” in an otherwise
rationalized world. Spectrality, according to Kochhar-Lindgren, is all around us; indeed, it is “the medium in which, and as which, we exist” (2).

**Specters of the Novelist.** In both his novels and his networked identity, Doctorow exemplifies the prevalence of the specter, the ghost, or the version in a networked world. As I will show, his post-cyberpunk sf often deals in tropes of replication and degradation, simulation, feedback, and mutation. But such unruly textual/biological/computational processes also surface in his writing and publishing practices. As mentioned earlier, simultaneously with book publication he publishes his fiction online under a Creative Commons license, allowing free downloads and redistribution of his novels and stories for non-commercial purposes. He also podcasts virtually everything he writes and says in public (which, considering his former job as outreach coordinator for the EFF, has been a lot). After the print publication of two of his novels and one of his short story collections, he broadened the CC license for his first novel, _Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom,_ allowing people to make alterations to the text (while still prohibiting commercial uses), and he has published three more novels and a second story collection in the same manner. He treats his own texts, in other words, as what Hayles terms “assemblages” to be instantiated over and over again in different configurations, whether that means an individual reader’s experience of the story, an email serialization, a comic book version, a Brazilian Portuguese translation, or a podcast dramatization. For Doctorow, a reader’s interaction with his text is a valued compliment:

> I love the different [podcast] adaptations of the book—it’s amazing to hear my words read by so many different people, with so many different choices about how to dramatize it. Often, the reading isn’t how I heard it in my own head when I wrote it, which is cool—it’s wild to hear how your own words sound to someone else. (“Full-cast audio”)

On the other hand, in a _Forbes.com_ article Doctorow is also quick to assert that neither he nor his publishers are “patchouli-scented info-hippies who believe that information wants to be free” (“Giving It Away”). Indeed, he repeatedly stresses his entrepreneurial orientation to writing in an electronic age, a time full of distractions, textual and otherwise, when, he believes, novelists must do whatever they can to attract an audience. Doctorow’s platforms as blogger, journalist, and cyber-activist have come in handy here, and he is not shy about mentioning awards or nominations and offering autographed copies of his fiction for sale at the same time that he is giving the texts away. He consciously makes use of sf’s “organized fandom,” whom he sees as “intrepid promoters” of his post-cyberpunk sf, citing the “high correlation between technical employment and science fiction reading.” But he also firmly believes that “you sure can’t force a reader to pay for access to information anymore,” and that, therefore, as reading narratives in non-codex forms becomes more common, novelists will “have to figure out how to charge for something else.” His optimism about this state of affairs is informed by a sophisticated, if flamboyantly expressed, sense of reading, authorship, and the history of the book: “The golden age of hundreds of writers who lived off of nothing but their royalties is bunkum. Throughout history,
writers have relied upon day jobs, teaching, grants, inheritances, translation, licensing, and other varied sources to make ends meet.” Doctorow enthuses that “the Internet is a literary world of written words. What a fine thing that is for writers,” and he insists that “giving away e-books sells printed books.”

Two years after Down and Out’s appearance, The Book Standard printed an article on the publishing experiment to provide free e-texts, which noted that Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom had sold “more than 10,000 copies, as reported by Nielsen BookScan,” a figure that compares favorably with other first sf novels, according to Patrick Nielsen Hayden, Doctorow’s editor at Tor; he claims that “most first-time sci-fi novels sell between 2,500 and 5,000 copies—if the author is lucky” (Weinberg). In “Giving It Away,” Doctorow reported that there had been 700,000 downloads of Down and Out as of December 2006 and Tor Books had issued six printings. He seems, at the very least, not to have been hurt by his unconventional wish to provide open access to his texts on the Internet and he has continued to use such innovative networked means to promote his books, such as allowing Down and Out to be part of a “DailyLit” reading group at the social networking site Twitter.com. Most recently he has contracted with Zipidee, an online retailer, to market his Young Adult novel Little Brother through distribution of a widget, an embeddable content sample that can be shared virally.

If Doctorow is indeed like Dickens in his notable merging of the roles of novelist and entrepreneur. I would argue that an open-source, hacker ethic at least partly shapes his attitude toward his works and their lives online. That ethic is tested, however, when the textual ghosts that escape his control are no longer merely bibliographical but become biographical. An extended debate on Wikipedia, “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” about how successful Doctorow has been as a novelist has made the biographical entry on “Cory Doctorow” a conspicuous appearance of the novelist’s specter, as well as a test of his tolerance for the instabilities of both e-texts and postmodern subjectivity. Because this online encyclopedia allows anyone to become an editor and to change entries, it (like the blog genre) has become virtually synonymous with the info-anarchy of the digital realm. For those who revel in the chaos of the Internet, Wikipedia concretizes certain non-authoritarian, open-access publishing ideals not very different from those Doctorow espouses in his journalism and his blogging about copyright and “digital rights management”; for more conservative voices, like certain academicians and (rather ironically, given its own 2003-04 scandal) The New York Times, Wikipedia can represent the chicanery fostered by the often unauthorized and unvetted process of online publishing. The Wikipedians believe that their policies of providing readers (and thereby potential editors) with access to an entry’s history and the discussion about it ensure that eventually a “neutral” or “objective” point of view on each subject will develop; along the way, however, the “edit wars” on a topic can make for a contentious versioning process. Doctorow has been involved in at least two episodes where content or links in an entry have been repeatedly added, removed, and reinserted by editors with different perspectives, but I will focus here on the conflict over his own biography.
In May 2003 a basic biography was posted on the site; it provided factual information about his birthplace and residence, his job for the EFF, and his publications to date, including his experiment with the CC license and free downloads. For several months, minor edits were made to correct simple errors and update information. Starting in September 2004, however, a series of users began to add commentary to the page about Doctorow’s success, or lack thereof, as both artist and entrepreneur. On 25 September, for example, an anonymous contributor asserts that *Down and Out* has “sold approximately 7,000 copies and seemed to demonstrate the viability of free media. However,” the same user continues, “his subsequent efforts have not achieved the same critical or commercial success despite generous publicity and free downloads” (02:00, 25 Sept. 2004 200.45.71.40). On the next day, another contributor deletes the (unreferenced) sales figure in favor of an even murkier one and toughens the assessment:

\[\text{Subsequent revelations have shown that sales of the novel were far lower than expected, numbering only in the thousands in hardback and paperback combined. Critically and commercially, Doctorow’s subsequent efforts have fallen even lower despite generous publicity and free downloads.} \]

(03:40, 26 Sept. 2004 218.188.8.182)

On 29 October, yet another anonymous user emends the last claim about later publications, asserting that they have “garnered lukewarm reviews and failed to earn commercial success despite massive publicity and free downloads” (02:51, 29 Oct. 2004 195.61.146.130). In sum, these unfriendly critics convey in increasingly harsh terms the impression that Doctorow is a mediocre or even failed writer.

By 10 November, one more anonymous contributor has staked a claim in the process, leaping to the novelist’s defense by substituting an entirely new commentary that reverses the judgments on the success of the publishing experiment:

Doctorow’s first novel, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, is evidence of the viability of free media because it achieved commercial success despite having been offered for free online. The book outsold all expectations, selling twice as well as his publisher anticipated and outselling other first novels published by new sf writers that year.

The system has worked even better for his subsequent books.... (19:56, 10 Nov. 2004 84.9.22.44)

Curiously, four minutes later, Doctorow himself enters the fray with some minor editing, and he helps to revise the entry during November and December 2004, in addition to asking for “reverts” when anonymous users reinsert the material he finds to be inaccurate. Doctorow’s extensive contributions eventually raise concerns among other participants in the process, who point to *Wikipedia*’s policy discouraging people from writing about themselves. In response to an assertion that he became a Wikipedian simply to edit his own bio, Doctorow shoots back:
It may be that a person is incapable of being neutral on the subject of his own bio; nevertheless when it comes to factual questions (e.g., how well a book has sold), there should be no question of bias: either the book sold or it didn't.

I didn't create my Wikipedia account solely to edit my entry; like many Wikipedia editors, I created my Wikipedia account because I saw an entry I wanted to correct. There is every possibility that I will subsequently find other entries to edit (I've done some minor edits to other entries already). It's incorrect to say that my account was created solely to edit this entry; it was merely *initially* created to do so. (12:52, 12 January 2006 [GMT])

Doctorow had pointed out the subjective judgment implicit in others’ characterizations of his novel’s “success,” but here he glosses over the evaluative nature of his own phrase, “how well a book sold.” Eventually, he takes a backseat in the editing, and other contributors take over the job of policing the bio (with one, for example, exercising a “revert” when someone else has inserted “self-promoting” before “novelist” in the entry’s opening sentence), and for the last couple of years there has been a lot of editing and a lively debate about how much and what kind of criticism is appropriate to this biographical entry. As of August 2009, the version current presents the facts about his novels’ CC-licensed publication without evaluations of success or failure.

What interests me about the episode is Doctorow’s response—not so much to the negative descriptions of himself or his work as to the process itself. Though he fights strenuously to present his version of himself on the page (or screen), he does not react against the textualization of his identity per se or the freedom contributors have to edit it. Rather, he maintains his faith in a collaborative ethic facilitated by textual networks, including ventures beyond his control such as Wikipedia, which, in a message-board posting at Making Light, a blog co-edited by Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden (the former, as mentioned, Doctorow’s editor at Tor), he has termed a “genuine h2g2 [Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy] minus the editors.” He argues that Wikipedia’s transparency and its “set of systems designed to reward good people who do good things” represent the democratic potential of electronic textuality. The current controversies over how to handle “trolls,” as online communities call anti-social members, concern him because he fears that some “security” measures hamper the rich understanding of a subject that is the ideal of an encyclopedia:

I think that the recent crackdown on pop-culture material and the emphasis on citation come under the category of letting assholes rent space in your head. The people who poo-pooed Wikipedia as unserious, un-encyclopedic, and doomed to failure have gotten under the skin of some Wikipedians, so much so that they are attacking the thing that makes Wikipedia greatest—its expansiveness and its ability to solve debates by finding common ground. It's like an allergic reaction, the immune system attacking the body. (Doctorow, Untitled comment)

In May 2007, Doctorow published an article in Information Week that calls for carefully measured response when administrators are dealing with “[s]omeone in your [online] group [who] undergoes a radical personality shift and begins picking fights, or someone new [who] comes to the party with an agenda,” lest the
democratic nature of the online community and its “festive, rollicking, passionate discussion” be threatened (“How to Keep”).

Doctorow’s cyber-activism and his theorizing about electronic textuality recall the utopianism of digital pioneers such as Ted Nelson, whose Project Xanadu offered an early vision of an accessible, computer-networked world, and Richard Stallman, founder of the GNU Project and visionary behind the open-source movement; Doctorow’s science fiction has also served as a forum for these same passions. In a talk about the future of the genre at the 2007 LA Times Festival of Books, Doctorow voiced his sense that speculative fiction is always about the present, no matter how far in the future it is set, and his own “stories of the future present” are clearly parables about the intersection of technology and society now (“Science Fiction”). Much has been published in recent years about the relationship of science fiction to critical theory and political consciousness. Critics such as Darko Suvin and Carl Freedman have argued that the sf genre is itself a form of critical theory, because sf stories involve both estrangement from and cognition of the everyday around us, routinely testing the concept of utopia and thereby sustaining what German philosopher Ernst Bloch termed “the hope principle” (Suvin 7-8; Freedman 63-67). In his post-cyberpunk sf, Doctorow has offered an often comic vision of a technologically-mediated society that warns against false hopes while retaining an optimism about the networked world. In the last few years, however, like William Gibson, Ken Macleod, Charles Stross, Chris Moriarty, and others, he has been glimpsing a darker future, whether near or far. Never far from the center of his novels are his activist’s concerns with cyber civil liberties.

A Post-Cyberpunk “Heterotopia.” In a 1991 essay on hypertext, Stuart Moulthrop compared the future worlds of Gibson and Ted Nelson, concluding that Nelson’s Xanadu, the open-access knowledge network that visionaries thought the Internet could be, serves as a counter to the “dark dream” that Gibson presents of “an empowering technology turned into a mechanism of co-optation and enslavement” (702). Nelson’s vision is one not of utopia, concludes Moulthrop, but rather of “heterotopia, an otherplace not zoned in the usual ways for property and performativity” (702). Obliquely borrowing from Foucault, Moulthrop asserts that electronic textuality opens the door to a society structured contingently, as a network of different spaces that can engender critique:

Cyberspace as Gibson and others define it is a Cartesian territory where scientists of control define boundaries and power lines. The Xanadu model lets us conceive instead a decentered space of literacy and empowerment where each subject acts as “kybernos,” steering her way across the intertextual sea. (702)

Similarly, in his comparison of the utopian problem in the science fiction of Heinlein, Le Guin, and Delany, Neil Easterbrook argues that while the first two writers’ speculative societies wind up reinscribing forms of central authority (egoistic in the first, collective in the second), Delany’s postmodern heterotopia in Triton (1976) ironizes anarchic politics, exploring the possibilities for social change by dropping monologic “lecture, manifesto, or allegory” in favor of a protagonist’s struggle with “a multiplicity of ethnic, generic, and social codes”
(63). Whether we are considering his arguments about the complex docuvre of electronic textuality or the multiple ironies of his first novel, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, Doctorow’s texts likewise exhibit a pragmatic orientation to the coming revolution. *Down and Out* is indebted to cyberpunk in its use of what Larry McCaffery refers to as c-punk’s “darkly humorous vision” and its “parodically nonconformist stance” (12-13), typical of novels such as Rudy Rucker’s *The Hacker and the Ants* (1994) and Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992). This allegiance is signaled in *Down and Out* by the appearance of “the brave Hiro Protagonist” in a post-corporate Magic Kingdom’s “Snow Crash Spectacular Parade” (97). Finally, however, Doctorow’s novel eschews the nightmarish Gibsonian “consensual illusion” of cyberspace for the possibility of, in Moulthrop’s words, “genuine, negotiated consensus” (702).

The society of *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* is presented as a seeming utopia extrapolated from predictions about socioeconomic shifts facilitated by the Internet and by nanotechnology that eliminates scarcity; in its anarchism, it seems to be the antithesis of Gibson’s corporate dystopias. The novel itself, however, functions as a heterotopia in its ironizing of the faith put in technological salvation by some futurists, a kind of false idealism characterized by Kocchar-Lingdren as

the fantasy of an infinite day or of a finality of simultaneity—information without static that is available the instant we desire it—[which] entails a complete erasure of the vacillation between day and night, between the moment of desire and its (non)fulfillment, and of the rhythmicity upon which both time and writing depend.

(5)

The central conflict in *Down and Out* turns upon such a delusive wish to erase mediation, but the novel’s “dialectical complexity” (Freedman 80) as a work of science fiction and its status as heterotopia result from its combined critique of both the cooperative technotopia of the “Bitchun Society” and the hyper-individualistic ludditism of the protagonist Julius, who turns out to be the “troll” in the networked community, even though he is the very person who tries to lead the resistance against the fantasy of techno-idealism. In the late twenty-first century, the Bitchun Society has eliminated death and scarcity (thanks to that unspecified nanotechnology, the “backing-up” of consciousnesses, and the “decanting” or downloading of consciousness into “force-grown clones”) and has replaced governments and corporations with a reputation economy (based on a currency of network-registered, constantly-updated esteem called “Whuffie”) and “ad-hocracies,” spontaneous cooperatives (such as today’s peer-to-peer networks) dedicated to pursuing the interests of their members in benefiting others (by, for instance, running Walt Disney World for the tourists). This world is filled with imaginative technologies (such as neurally installed “HUDs” or “head-up displays”) that are extrapolated from current ones (such as the HUDs in military aircraft), and the novel thereby serves as both vision of the shape of things to come and critique of the wealthy, technology-saturated developed world. As one of my students, Joel Miller, commented on Doctorow’s world of plenty: “there is no money, no death, free drugs, you can pick your own body and appearance
and alter your moods with free Doctor-prescribed drugs.... I suppose the lines between good and bad get real blurry. I suppose life for all becomes a sort of extended, polite orgy” (“Doctorow never left”). As in a number of literary utopias, such as William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890), the main problem is boredom (Freedman 79), which in the Bitchun Society leads characters to upload their consciousnesses to mainframes and “deadhead” themselves for decades or centuries at a time.

The plot, which exposes the Bitchun Society as a false utopia, revolves around the competition that develops in this supposedly harmonious, cooperative environment for control of “the happiest place on Earth.” Julius’s adhoc maintains the Liberty Square attractions as is, until another adhoc begins to update rides such as the Pirates of the Caribbean with a “flashbake” technology, which jarringly downloads into one’s consciousness the experience of the ride and its characters without the need to go through the narrative experience in time. The novel’s flashbaking thus concretizes what Kocchar-Lindgren refers to as “the idealism of the technological sublime that will want to cast off the body for the sake of the durability of pattern and information” (5). Fearing the loss of both his favorite old technology and his vocation, Julius tries to lead his reluctant troops in defense of the Haunted Mansion after the bleeding-edge adhoc refurbishes the Hall of Presidents and offers to zap its visitors “with the essence of Lincoln: every nuance of his speech, the painstakingly researched movement tics, his warts and beard and topcoat. It almost felt like I *was* Lincoln, [Julius tells the reader] for a moment, and then it passed” (57; emphasis in original). The fantasy here is, of course, that of the “real illusion,” a hyperreality that appears to do away with mediation but that has actually made it part of the “everyday invisible” (Kocchar-Lindgren 45) for purposes of collective manipulation. Julius voices a form of liberal paranoia when he tries to enlist his friend in his increasingly violent resistance:

“It’s good versus evil, Dan. You don’t want to be a post-person. You want to stay human. The rides are human. We each mediate them through our own experience. We’re physically inside of them, and they talk to us through our senses. What Debra’s people are building—it’s hive-mind shit. Directly implanting thoughts! Jesus! It’s not an experience, it’s brainwashing! You gotta know that.” (*Down and Out* 63-64)

At this point, one almost expects the Borg Queen to stroll into the Kingdom, because Julius brings up the standard sf trope of the hive-mind collective, a figure for the false utopia of collectivity as conformity and loss of agency, a recent example of which is figured in the “nants” of Rucker’s *Postsingular* (2007), voracious nanomachines programmed to consume the material world in order to map and thus create its virtual twin.

Ironically, Julius’s fight against the delusive flashbaking technology is carried out in behalf of an older, less high-tech version of the “facsimile-machine” (Kocchar-Lindgren 5), the Disney theme-park ride. If for intellectuals such as Baudrillard and Eco, the Disney Corporation and its technological dreams represent corporate America’s ability to impose the simulacrum or the hyperreal
on a willing populace, for Julius the Haunted Mansion and its older technology, with seams showing, stands in for a system that is beautiful despite its material traces, for a work of art that achieves its illusion by engaging rather than overriding the audience member’s consciousness:

The first couple rides through, I was just glad of the aggressive air conditioning and the delicious sensation of sweat drying on my skin. But on the third pass, I started to notice just how goddamn cool the thing was. There wasn’t a single bit of tech more advanced than a film-loop projector in the whole place, but it was all so cunningly contrived that the illusion of a haunted house was perfect: the ghosts that whirled through the ballroom were \textit{ghosts}, three-dimensional and ethereal and phantasmic.... She [Julius’s girlfriend Lil] grinned slyly at me as I debarked into the fried-food-and-disinfectant perfume of the Park, hands in pockets, thoroughly pleased with myself for having so completely \textit{experienced} a really fine hunk of art. (97-98; emphases in original)

The amusement park ride-as-art thus becomes in the novel a figure for the necessary element of noise in the system, a version of those uncanny ghosts that Kocchar-Lindgren values as a force of uncertainty and dissent in a technological world.

It could be said that Julius himself serves this function for the complacent Bitchun Society, which, Doctorow has noted, can come down hard on dissenters: “The big worry about reputation economics is that they punish minority opinions, instead of protecting them.... Also, they are rich-get-richer systems: the more whuffie you have, the more whuffie you may accumulate” (email communication). But in his righteous anger, Julius impatiently resorts to underhanded tactics in his battle for the ride. They backfire, leaving him “down and out,” both excommunicated from the neural network and bankrupt of Whuffie. He turns out to be right about the rival hi-tech adhoc’s involvement in his murder, but, since death is no longer really the end, his determination to find his killer becomes, perversely, self-centered:

Sure, I’d been murdered, but what had it cost me? A few days of “unconsciousness” while they decanted my backup into my new body, a merciful gap in memory from my departure at the backup terminal up until my death. I wasn’t one of those nuts who took death \textit{seriously}. It wasn’t like they’d done something \textit{permanent}. (49-50; emphasis in original)

Since murder has been trivialized through the backing up and restoration of selves, it becomes one more issue of minor morals, like cutting into someone else’s lane on the highway. The absurdity here speaks to how violence and its consequences can be distanced, made part of the “everyday invisible,” through technology. In retrospect, however, Julius realizes that of greater consequence to the story he is telling are the implication of his friend Dan in the murder plot and the damaging obsession and competitiveness that take hold of him in his quest to stop Debra’s new technology. As Doctorow has said in an online interview, his protagonist has “failed to learn a bunch of life’s lessons. About trust and betrayal, for starters” (Interview at Secondlife.com).
More to blame than a power-hungry Debra for Julius’s loss of Whuffie and girlfriend by novel’s end is his own entrepreneurial individualism—which leads him in his spare time to study queuing styles in an effort to perfect a system of “beating the crowd” (95). He begins to adopt tactics such as those he abhors in Debra in an instance of “we have met the enemy and they are us.” The novel balances Julius’s noble mania for resisting the dream imposed by Debra’s new technology against the tendency he notes in himself to get fed up with the “faceless, passive-aggressive mass” and “the starchy world of consensus-building” (101). Readers are positioned between two problematic, equally authoritarian, paths to utopia: the Bitchun Society’s, collectively organized but also homogenized through seamless information technology, and Julius’s, egoistic, violent, and in the service of a fetishized institution. The conflict offers no easy choices and, just when readers may rue Julius’s entrepreneurialism and the go-it-alone attitude it entails, they find that Debra has indeed plotted to have him killed to clear an obstacle to her building plans. She then created the perfect alibi for herself by reverting to a backup made right before she conceived of the plot, thus ensuring that she was genuinely conscious of her own “innocence.” A flaw that the various interest groups in the novel—the Bitchuns, Debra and her cohort, even Julius and his friends—share is a wish to stifle dissent and control the reality by manipulating the technology. At one point, Julius decides he will combat Debra by making the animatronics of the Haunted Mansion more participatory—through inviting the virtual or ghostly selves of fans to inhabit the ghosts of the ride—but he is quickly soured on this tactic when he finds that the invitees have their own ideas about what they can do with the ride and he loses control. Both the Bitchun Society in its flawed collectivity and Julius in his messianic individualism try to suppress dissent that requires negotiation in order to achieve their visions. It is, however, in an anecdote about Julius’s first marriage that the novel most poignantly criticizes the utopian erasure of differences.

In a flashback, Julius tells the story of his marriage to Zed, a free-spirited “transhuman” (114) who loses her sanity when she follows Julius to Earth, leaving behind her “climate-controlled, soft-edged life in space” (113) and replacing her “bewildering array of third-party enhancements: a vestigial tail, eyes that saw through most of the RF spectrum, her arms, her fur, dogleg reversible knee-joints and a completely mechanical spine” (114) with a conventional human appearance and existence. When Zed, driven mad by terrestrial conformity, reclaims her identity by reverting to a saved pre-Julius version of herself rather than by undergoing counseling, Doctorow provokes questions about embodied experience, memory, and identity similar to those raised in the movie *Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind* (2004), in which heartbroken or angry lovers visit Lacuna, Inc. to have an unhappy affair obliterated from their consciousnesses. In both novel and film, technology enables willful forgetting, but what is registered in the text through the point of view of the rejected lover is a sense of pathos for the bits of personality and understanding that are potentially lost to erasure.

This complex ironized view of the costs and benefits involved in technological change characterizes both *Down and Out* and Doctorow’s work as a whole. Doctorow has claimed that with the adoption of new technology we get not less
human but different kinds of human (email communication). In a world where “the lines have long been drawn that have prepared the network that puts us online whether we want to be or not” (Kocchar-Lindgren 30), the utopian possibilities lie in how open and democratic that network is. Despite Julius’s reaction to “flash-baking,” it is the social dynamics fostered by the strange new technology that the novel depicts with suspicion rather than the technology itself. Only when Julius is down and out does he gain perspective on both the Bitchun Society’s blithe disregard for the value of differing versions of history and his own foolish obsession with (even fetishization of) its artifacts. Bottomed out in Whuffie and offline thanks to misfired cloak-and-dagger efforts at sabotaging the flashbaking apparatus, Julius finds himself taking advice from, of all people, the “innocent” Debra:

“You totter around pissing and moaning about your little murder, your little health problems—yes, I’ve heard—your little fixation on keeping things the way they are. You need some perspective, Julius. You need to get away from here: Disney World isn’t good for you and you’re sure as hell not any good for Disney World.”

It would have hurt less if I hadn’t come to the same conclusion myself, somewhere along the way. (184)

Heeding the wisdom of the advice, Julius checks out of the cyber-society, refusing to erase his own folly and misadventures through immediate restoration from backup, instead heading off for space and coming to terms with his past through the technology of writing:

The universe gets older. So do I. So does my backup, sitting in redundant distributed storage dirtside, ready for the day that space or age or stupidity kills me. It recedes with the years, and I write out my life long-hand, a letter to the me that I’ll be when it’s restored into a clone somewhere, somewhere. It’s important that whoever I am then knows about this year, and it’s going to take a lot of tries for me to get it right. (206)

Once Julius’s dictatorial impulses peak, he reawakens to what Kocchar-Lindgren terms “the rhythmicity upon which time and writing depend” (5), and to the alternative value of being “down and out,” of living through time as a low-tech creature, his memory, with embarrassing mistakes intact, preserved in the multiple drafts of the story he has inscribed. In Nelson’s vision of Xanadu, all versions of a document—including those replete with errors—should be available in a grand unified data pool. A heterotopia is constituted through that sense of the value of alterity. By the end of Down and Out, Julius has found in drafting and revising his story another way of valuing the passage through time that has been represented for him throughout the story by the experience of the Haunted Mansion ride—a trial-and-error, contingency-filled sort of existence, where with each ride the new details he notices reinforce “just how goddamn cool the thing was” (97). He has come to terms with degradation, one might say, and, though he will still accept the Bitchun Society’s version of digital immortality, he has also realized the value of being analog. The utopian impulses of Doctorow’s science fiction similarly lie in his faith in the processes of vision and revision common to a networked world of writers and readers.
Doctorow’s protagonists routinely fall on one side or the other in analogous battles over networked discourse and democracy—in his second novel, *Eastern Standard Tribe* (2004), Art Berry fights a girlfriend and an associate for control over a peer-to-peer file sharing technology, and in a subplot of his third novel, the contemporary fantasy *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town* (2005), the protagonist (who goes by many male names beginning with “A” during the course of the book) and his friend pursue a grass-roots scheme to blanket a Toronto neighborhood with free Wi-Fi. As we have already seen, Julius in *Down and Out* wrestles with his crowd-beating impulses and tries to enlist his Disney World community when trying to best Debra. Whether in science fiction, fantasy, online communities, or real life, Doctorow’s concern is for how the principle of free speech is being shaped by developments in information technology, and his ideals hearken back to Ted Nelson’s push for hypertextual literacy, where the users’ control over the network is the *sine qua non* that promotes multiple versions of texts, multiple perspectives on any given subject, and therefore a richer and more complex understanding of the world.

**Coda.** The Iraq War began about a month after the publication of *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, and in the years since, though his subjects have not changed much, the tone of Doctorow’s writing, both fiction and non-fiction, has become markedly darker and more urgent. In his journalism, he has recently editorialized against Internet filtering, warning that “there’s an inverse correlation between the regulation of speech and the freedom of a society,” and that “in the new global world of censorware, we all live on Syria’s internet, China’s Internet, filtered by companies whose first priority is to ensure that Beijing is happy with its work” (“See No Evil”). He has criticized the growing reliance on surveillance technologies to provide an illusion of security in the city of the future—a “neighborly Panopticon” that threatens our “social contracts,” which he nevertheless hopes are “stronger than our technology” (“Snitchtown”). In fiction, Doctorow has embodied these concerns about the technologically-enabled police state in both the sf stories collected in *Overclocked* and in *Little Brother*, his young-adult novel about the so-called “war on terror” and “homeland security.” In the former, “I, Robot” weaves together the worlds of Asimov and Orwell in the story of a cynical, robot-wary detective who discovers that state propaganda and military robots have suppressed knowledge of the other side’s superior technology and civil liberties. The short-short “Printcrime” and the long story “After the Siege” also take on the damage done by state or corporate monopolization of information technology, while “Anda’s Game” and “I, Row-Boat” focus on issues of identity and otherness, as mediated by the network.

Like these stories, *Little Brother* foregrounds both its intertextual allusions and its interest in teaching readers about the dangers to civil liberties posed by state or corporate control of information technology. Marcus, the protagonist of *Little Brother*, narrates his own story, as does Julius in *Down and Out*; Marcus’ voice (like Julius’s) resembles Doctorow’s own online persona in its exuberance and ingenuity. Marcus echoes Doctorow the cyber-activist and the older, wiser Julius when he explains to his readers the value of never deleting anything,
“especially the stupid stuff” (Little Brother 56), and he repeats Julius’s mistake of going it alone and getting “a little aggro” when he runs into resistance from his friends (130). Even more than the recent stories, however, Little Brother diverges from Down and Out in its emphasis on instruction. This latest novel features digressions of several pages in length on the history and methods of cryptography, a nod to the open-source movement in a tutorial on the GIMP (an open-source graphics editing program), and an extensive bibliography to allow kids to try the hacker methods at home. In reaction to the events of the last several years, Doctorow has incorporated into his fictions more of the activist’s “lecture, manifesto, or allegory” (Easterbrook 63) and perhaps relinquished some of the heterotopic ironies.

Though these texts have been quite successful—especially Little Brother, which appeared on a number of best-of-2008 lists, including the New York Times Best Children’s Books of the Year—I want to end this discussion of what I perceive as a shift in Doctorow’s recent sf by examining the less direct (or less pedagogical) novella “There’s a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow/Now is the Best Time of Your Life” (TGBBT/NBTYL), one more fiction involving Disney audioanimatronics, technologically-enabled immortality, networked emotional controls, and the “future present.” The lengthy title is an allusion to the songs that play throughout Walt Disney’s “Carousel of Progress”—an attraction first exhibited in the General Electric Pavilion at the 1964 New York World’s Fair and then housed at Disneyland (1967–73) and Disney World (1975–present). Whereas Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom optimistically celebrated the “Imagineering” of a Disney freed from its corporate greed and depicts the problems of a future post-humanity as other than those of the military-industrial complex, TGBBT/NBTYL gives the reader a world that has been decimated by Mecha (large, militarized, mechanized bodies/vehicles common in sf and manga plots). Like Doctorow’s other protagonists, Jimmy, who narrates his own story, has a sense of humor (important considering that for much of the tale he is a genetically-engineered 30-year-old stuck in an eleven-year-old body, like an inverted Tithonus), and he describes with gusto his efforts to hunt Wumpuses, voracious, tentacled robots that recycle anything that is in their path other than the flora. In this narrative, the world has failed to evolve beyond scarcity and war; rather, technology has enabled an all-out conflict between urbanites who value the past and would salvage technology, including Jimmy and his dad (the latter has rescued the Carousel of Progress and installed it in their home at Comerica Park in Detroit), and the “Treehuggers,” a community whose members carry mandatory hive-mind implants that dampen their affective lives to a calming and enervating equilibrium and who are dedicated to destroying the remnants of the old civilization with the Wumpuses.

The inclusion of a networked community that controls the disruptive and/or dissenting passions of its individual members, like the Disney elements, signals that TGBBT/NBTYL is an intertext, even something of a revision, of Doctorow’s first novel. As in that book, the protagonist here is betrayed by his girlfriend, whose nature-loving community in this case is willing to kill Jimmy and salvage his uploaded consciousness in order to normalize the maverick. Where the
Bitchun Society of *Down and Out* presented a comic version of the future, the post-apocalyptic world of this novella features mutilated cyborgs (including a memorable “pack” of dog brains downloaded into mechanized bodies) and savage violence (Jimmy first kills when he is actually ten years old). Indeed, TGBBT/NBTYL is something of a “revert” to the techno-dystopias of William Gibson and other cyberpunks, although, characteristically for Doctorow, the willingness of individuals to abdicate responsibility to the group for their interactions with technology still takes more of the blame than sinister state or corporate control.

At the 2007 *LA Times* Book Festival panel on the future of science fiction, Doctorow answered a question about the historical context of contemporary sf (“Science Fiction”). The audience member noted that during the Vietnam era there was an “outcry, especially from the science fiction writing community,” with much of “what was going on in the fake worlds mirroring the real world.” He questioned where that kind of political consciousness is today in sf. In his answer, Doctorow cited his own forthcoming book (*Little Brother*) about “Department of Homeland Security paranoiac,” Ken MacLeod’s “Orwellian story” *The Execution Channel* (2007), which “scared the hell out of [him],” and William Gibson’s latest novel *Spook Country* (2007), “about NSA illegal wiretapping”; he thereby demonstrated his mindfulness of the political context of his own work. In a post-Iraq world of so-called “necessary” wars to fight the terrorists, Doctorow’s fiction has shifted its perspective, mirroring his ramped-up fight against technological tools for managing citizens and finding much more serious consequences to the social practice of conforming to the perceived consensus and passively accepting the need for controls—consequences that can include trusting to an official program of violence to pacify unruly outsiders. Though Doctorow may still believe in a great big beautiful tomorrow, his recent fiction implies that the pathways to even a modest version of it may be labyrinthine.

NOTES

1. Doctorow has collected several of his previously published articles and talks on DRM and other issues involved with electronic textuality in *Content: Selected Essays on Technology, Creativity, Copyright, and the Future of the Future* (2008). I reference several in this essay, citing their first publication.

2. See Murphy for another analysis of the hacker ethic that informs Doctorow’s writing. Murphy uses Steven Levy’s *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (1984) to define this ethic, and he specifically focuses on how it shapes Doctorow’s second novel, *Eastern Standard Tribe* (2004). While Murphy sees that novel’s protagonist (and by extension Doctorow himself) as exemplifying a hacker ethic, I find perhaps more tension in the writer’s discourse between the hacker’s ethic and the hawkers’ entrepreneurialism. Murphy and I also share the sense that Doctorow’s texts fit Hayles’s notion of the “work-as-assemblage.”

3. For the principles of *Wikipedia*’s originators, see its “Five Pillars.” For a report on its controversial nature among critics, see Cohen.

4. For the current and all archived versions of the entry, including all the ancillary pages discussed in the following paragraphs, visit <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cory_Doctorow>. The edit war about sales and critical success, which I discuss below, is accessible through the “Talk:Cory_Doctorow” discussion and history pages that
accompany the biography, and it has been mentioned in an article about Wikipedia poison-pen vandalism in The Register (Orlowski).

5. Moulthrop’s mention of “heterotopia” owes an unacknowledged debt to the more familiar coinage by Michel Foucault, for whom heterotopia designates “real places ... which are something like counter-sites” to the rest of a society (“Of Other Spaces”). Moulthrop emphasizes the term as an alternative to the binary of utopia/dystopia, as it has come to be employed in speculative fictions and their criticism. See also Easterbrook.

6. For a fascinating analysis of the novel from the perspective of “the double logic of remediation,” see Mason. Remediation is Bolter and Grusin’s term for the troping or refashioning of old media by new media, a process they see as crucial to the latter’s acceptance. Like Mason, I am interested in Doctorow’s sense of the inescapable “textuality of technology,” and his analysis usefully extends that textuality even to the “flashbaking” experience, which, he argues, remediates older textual forms such as letters and diaries, while providing the illusion of direct, unmediated access.

7. According to Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil’s The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, “This is a twist on Oliver Hazard Perry’s words after a naval battle: ‘We have met the enemy, and they are ours.’ The updated version was first used in the comic strip ‘Pogo,’ by Walt Kelly, in the 1960s and referred to the turmoil caused by the Vietnam War” (Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil). According to Keyes’s The Quote Verifier, however, Kelly first used a slightly different version of his expression as a comment on McCarthyism in The Pogo Papers, published in 1953, with the pithier version appearing on an Earth Day poster in 1970 (57).

8. I borrow here a metaphorical opposition between digital and analog that structures Ellen Ullman’s novel about the dysfunctional life of a programmer, The Bug (2003). The protagonist, Ethan Levin, cannot function socially in part because of the discrete compartmentalization of his intellectual and affective lives fostered by the cognitive habits of his occupation, which stand in contrast to the more holistic or continuous understanding of the narrator, a test engineer named Roberta, who has come to programming from the humanities.

9. “Anda’s Game,” first published at Salon.com, offers an effective critique of the current world’s very real problem of cyber-sweatshops. Interestingly, David Moles has published a short story entitled “Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom” that offers its own riff on a virtual world where uploaded posthumans struggle against corporate (AI-administered) exploitation.

10. As of this writing, this text is available only in beta release, so to speak, as a novella-in-progress available through Doctorow’s podcast. All of Doctorow’s CC-licensed fictions and essays are available at his website (<http://www.crphound.com>). The seven-part podcast of “TGBBT/NBTYL” is also archived at <http://www.archive.org>.

11. Jimmy’s adversaries are named after the fanciful but bloody creature that lurked in a labyrinth in an early computer game created by Gregory Yob. See the entry “Hunt the Wumpus” at Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hunt_the_Wumpus>).

WORKS CITED


———. Email to the author. 27 Sept. 2004.
———. Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town. New York: Tor, 2005.


ABSTRACT

This essay examines the science fiction and blogging of Canadian writer Cory Doctorow to argue that both his works and advocacy of his publishing methods are indicative of current battles over the cultural implications of electronic textuality and serve as harbingers of the novelist’s place in a networked world. On the one hand, Doctorow acts as entrepreneur, promoting his own work tirelessly via the Internet and, on the other, he advocates Creative Commons licensing and open access to creative works. These dual interests, seemingly in conflict, demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the networked nature of identity and power, an understanding also evident in the conflicts in Doctorow’s fiction, which increasingly warns about the dangers to civil liberties in a technologically-mediated society while nevertheless retaining some optimism about the future.