interface analysis (15%)

For this assignment, you are tasked with producing a conference-length (8-10 page) paper that performs a critical visual rhetorical analysis of a user interface of your choice. A user interface (UI) functions as the shared boundary across which human users and computers interact.   Further, Selfe and Selfe (1994) articulate interfaces as rhetorical, culturally contingent, and ideologically saturated:

> *interfaces* [are] those primary representations of computer systems or programs that show up on screens used by both teachers and students. Within the virtual space represented by these interfaces, and elsewhere within computer systems, the values of our culture–ideological, political, economic, educational–are mapped both implicitly and explicitly, constituting a complex set of material relations among culture, technology, and technology users. (p. 485)

To provide a few examples, one might analyze an academic program or other website (Knight, Rife, et al, 2009.; Sidler and Jones, 2009), computer desktop or other technical interface (Selfe and Selfe, 1994), software interface (Tufte, 2003), interface of a mobile application, the interface of a social media site, or something else. Whatever you choose, it would be helpful if you have some level of acquaintance with either the site, or its content, or if you are beginning what will become a more sustained analysis of the site (i.e., via a dissertation).

Learning Outcomes

This assignment is designed to help you achieve the following learning outcomes:

- You will practice applying the theories of visual rhetoric we've read by analyzing a visual and interactive user interface.

- You will gain a stronger understanding of the relationship between visuals, embodied practice, and ways of knowing by closely examining the interactive and rhetorical functions of digital interfaces.

- You will have an opportunity to consider how visual conventions are situated in relation to–and guided by–larger institutions.

- You will describe the rhetorical effects of visual rhetoric, including its social, cultural, and political impacts.

Writing the Paper

To perform a critical visual rhetorical analysis of a user interface, you should study closely the interface at hand. To do so, you might consider any number of the following questions:

- Who is the target/primary user? Who are the secondary users, unintended users, and other stakeholders? Try to be as specific as possible.

- What are the tasks and interactions (human-computer, human-human) that are facilitated by and through the interface?

- What kinds of content are presented through the interface?

- What are the organizing logics of the interface?

- What are the ideological and cultural values and assumptions imparted through the interface, whether through it content, its organizing logics, or the interactions facilitated?

- In what contexts, and in what kinds of environments, will these tasks be conducted and these interactions take place?

- What are the limitations of the interface? What and who does it leave out?

- What are the range of emotions and embodied responses that are enabled and encouraged by the interface? On what memories, literacies, and histories does it rely?

Remember, as with any critical essay, your paper should be focused and it should exhibit a strong sense of purpose that is clear, specific, and well-supported, and that is constructed with its audience in mind. It should demonstrate a clear and coherent argument that is specific to what it is you are analyzing, but it should also consider the larger implications of that analysis, whether for visual rhetoric studies, rhetoric and writing, or some other area of scholarly inquiry.

To do so, you should situate your analysis in relation to a larger scholarly conversation. For example: What scholarship within visual rhetoric studies will you rely on, take up, and/or re-examine? What critical ideas and concepts will inform your analysis and *how* you examine and interact with the interface? One might, for instance, apply or reconfigure the three-lens framework (cultural, institutional, aesthetic) described in Knight, Rife, et al.'s (2009) "About Face" to a different interface.

Assessment

A strong critical visual UI analysis paper will:

- communicate a clear and compelling sense of purpose through an original and focused argument that is tailored for its target audience;

- demonstrate a thoughtful, attentive, and critically-engaged analysis that is meaningfully informed by the texts and ideas read and discussed in class up until this point;

- thoughtfully take up the historical, cultural, and environmental context of the interface and its rhetorics in ways that enhance the paper's purpose;

- situate itself in relation to one or more scholarly conversation(s);

- include substantial support for its claims through descriptions, citations, and measured and reasoned explanations;

- use arrangement strategies to support its purpose; for instance, signposting key points and terms, and articulating the relationship among these points, terms, and the paper's main purpose.

Timeline

W 3/28   First draft due to Canvas > Assignments by class, 3:59 PM for peer review workshop of drafts in class.

W 4/4   Final version due to Canvas > Assignments by 11:59 PM.