

## Chapter II

# Greasemonkey and a Challenge to Notions of Authorship

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter introduces Greasemonkey, a new extension for the Firefox browser, which enables users to alter the behavior and appearance of Web pages as the pages load. The chapter claims that Greasemonkey is forcing a reevaluation of what it means to be an author in digital environments. Using Michel Foucault's (1979) original question, "What is an author?" the chapter argues that creators of Greasemonkey scripts take on the additional roles of designer and programmer. Also, the chapter cautions that since Greasemonkey scripts have the ability to alter the layout, navigation, and advertising on a Web page, there may be legal ramifications in the future for this open source project.*

### INTRODUCTION

The question "What is an author?" has been the source of much scholarship in the humanities at least since the publication of Michel Foucault's (1979) famous essay, and recent developments in computer generated texts have only made it more pressing that scholars grapple with this fundamental question. Currently, there is increased recognition that the very idea of the "author-function" since the rise of print culture and intellectual property rights cannot be comprehensively understood without taking into account the complementary idea of a "designer," especially with respect to the production of digital texts. Consequently, hypertextual and digital theorists have

adopted the twin notions of author and designer to account for the assembly of interactive texts. While the addition of a designer has certainly deepened our understanding of how text gets produced, assembled, and disseminated, and thus represents a significant advance in the study of authorship and digital writing, current scholarship has yet to account for the role of the programmer as a distinct aspect of the author-function. The open source community and the technologies the community produces, present the opportunity to examine and question a programmer's status as an author. This chapter will assess hypertext and digital theories as they pertain to authors and designers and then show how the addition of the programmer to the theoretical nomenclature will

advance our understanding of the author-function in digital environments. While there are many innovative projects under development within the open source community, this chapter focuses on a new technology called Greasemonkey and the freedoms (and risks) it provides an author/designer/programmer.

## **GREASEMONKEY BACKGROUND**

Greasemonkey is an extension for the Firefox browser that enables users to install client-side “user scripts” that alter the behavior and appearance of Web pages. The alterations occur as a Web page is downloaded and rendered in a user’s Web browser. The alterations occur without the consent of the site owners. Traditionally, Web pages are fixed offerings developed for an audience to use but not to alter *and* use. All major Web browsers are equipped with the option to “view source” which reveals the source code responsible for a particular Web page. The source code can be copied, saved, and edited by an end-user. Greasemonkey is vastly different from simply acquiring the code in that edits occur as the page loads in Firefox allowing a user to continue to interact with a company’s Web page even after edits are complete. Greasemonkey’s functionality, therefore, enables an examination of the roles of authors, designers, and programmers as these figures write scripts that actively manipulate Web pages.

For example, a Greasemonkey script titled “Book Burro” enables users to simultaneously see competitive prices from other bookstores while searching Amazon.com. The script also searches for a book’s availability in local and national libraries. Web sites, especially large retail sites such as Amazon, are strategically designed, programmed, and “authored” to be effective marketing and sales tools. Greasemonkey enables users to reclaim the roles of author, designer, and programmer and recalibrate, edit, or “remix” Amazon’s strategies.

*Figure 1. Greasemonkey screen capture showing the Book Burro script*



This phenomenon is known as “active browsing.” While anyone may program a Greasemonkey script on their own, there are hundreds of scripts posted on sites dedicated to Greasemonkey such as userscripts.org.<sup>1</sup> The example in Figure 1 is the Book Burro script that displays competitive prices and library availability for a sought-after book. The information is displayed in a new menu in the left-hand corner of the browser window. Users may add or delete online stores or libraries from the display.<sup>2</sup>

## **MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER**

### **Author/Designer/Programmer: The Author-Function**

Is using Greasemonkey to create scripts such as Book Burro “writing” and worthy of the “author” distinction? Academics have had a relatively short but complex relationship with digital writing and digital texts. Throughout the 1990s, scholars tackled the complicated similarities between digital writing and popular critical theory movements such as post-structuralism and deconstructionism.

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