

## THE DELETE KEY

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"It is deeply satisfying to believe that we are not locked into our original statements, might start and stop, erase, **use the delete key in life**, and be saved from the roughness of our early drafts. Words can be retracted; souls can be reincarnated."  
—Nancy Sommers, "Between the Drafts" (1992)

### I. ODE

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I commence with the spirit of John Scenters-ZApico and his 2002 visual essay in *Computers and Composition*. There, he writes,

"I realize the centrality of hands, of omniscient fingers in every creation. Look down at hands while writers labor away, at your hands struggling at the keyboard. How sublime, how godly, in the struggle to create and destroy. Ah, if hands could talk!" (5)

Scenters-ZApico's is an ode of sorts, a devotional of impassioned interest in a mundane and hyperlocal site of compositional activity - *hands to keyboard*. I have to note first, admit really, how very long it took me to notice the pun in his title. But more than that, I declare kinship with his wonder, with his call for us to behold the kinetic activity from which written compositions of all sorts may spring. And so, consider his piece a gateway, as we zoom in on the tactile energies of keyboarding and to one key in particular that I wonder about as both my writing partner and potential icon of contemporary composing. What can this small thing, this single key among at least 64 others, reveal if we take it up? If we approach it as one of infinite artifacts in the material culture of writing?

### II. MY DELETE KEY

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Material culture study instructs that every *thing* is singular, or that it might be made so. It's a particularized *thing* we take up because, well, mostly I guess we don't have any other choice. How could I use, never mind critically examine, the delete key only *in general*?

I stand before you to disclose the following: a longstanding relationship with the delete key on my 2014 MacBook Air. My delete key is located on the right end of the second row of keys from the top, next door to the plus/equal key and the dashes. My delete key is black, backed with white light; and it shows little sign of wear in spite of its age, save a slight brown smudge around its lower left corner. When I think of writing on this machine, I sense repetitious beats on this key. I see the delete key when I picture acts of writing; I feel its significance to me as a writer.

### III. memory

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I suppose my awareness of delete might have started back when I received an electric typewriter for my birthday. This machine delighted me, as I used it to write for fun, mostly stories about girlfriends at camp or possibly something resembling poems. I don't remember much about how the machine worked, but I do recall it had a wite out-like tape I could trigger that would go back and chomp up the letters, words, or phrases I decided I didn't want. I don't recall what I did with my hands to initiate erasing, but I remember the raucous *sound* of its rapid chugga-chugs, and a little about how the page looked when it was written over.

The delete key also took my notice when I worked as an all-ages tutor in a private literacy center. As part of our writing curriculum, we tutors started sessions with prompted freewriting. I recall one high school junior typing slowly, deliberately then repeatedly erasing, her finger pressing lightly down on delete for some seconds as lines of letters disappeared. No delete, I'd remind. I remember a spirited fifth-grade boy, whose fingers worked artillery style on the all the keys and who routinely rapped on the delete, tearing through the lines of thinking one letter and space at a time.

I tried gentle reminders, modeling, outright bans, invisible writing. But I felt affinity with these tutees who couldn't keep from that key. I guess in my mind I diagnosed these writers with a lack of freeness, with fingers trained for correctness or surface-level-right. While I think that's part of it, for them and me, I've also come to wonder if writers at QWERTY keyboards of all kinds aren't *also* doing something else in deploying this key.

#### IV.

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Brown and Rivers repurpose the encomium as methodology for prying open “strangely intimate” and fleeting glimpses of our object-orientations, in their case, with QWERTY—the commonplace computer keyboard arrangement embedded differently but ultimately quite consistently on a range of writing machines. Though it would be interruptive, and probably impossible anyway, to sustain any measure of focus on it, they say “it might be worth allowing QWERTY to show itself now and again so that we remember how intricately it is threaded through our composing activities” (Brown and Rivers 223). A way to do this, they suggest, is to *notice*—to watch fingers as they compose sentences.

#### V.

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Edbauer Rice has argued that the field should take interest in the *mechanics*, the means, of digital production. Wresting the term from its narrow association with grammar or correctness, mechanics for Edbauer Rice is about knack and a drive to tinker with the ever-widening range of materials, tools, and implements for digital composing—various software, equipment like a microphone or digital audio recorder, or the complex processes of film or audio editing. Any and all available *means of making* digital text, she suggests, should not be dismissed as mere technical knowledge or instrumentalism, as these mechanics are just as integral a part of rhetoric as invention, delivery, circulation. “[M]echanics,” she declares, “is where all texts—architectonic constructions that they are—must begin.” (Edbauer Rice 385).

#### VI. notice

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Following these rhetoricians, I video’ed myself writing – writing email, this very conference paper, the beginnings of a eulogy, freewriting, journaling – to see what I was doing with this key I had been giving psychic and haptic weight to. I arranged my I-phone camera to focus most on the key, not worried about capturing what was emerging, or disappearing, on the screen. I then watched back these recordings, about 36 minutes total, for rhythms, sounds, and haptic sensations of “delete.” These are some of my observations here on the screen.

Over repeated watches, I was not surprised to see delete in persistent action, no matter what I was writing. I kind of suspected that. I didn’t know how arrhythmic my generative typing is. There is no momentum or pace to speak of, instead it’s a series of weirdly paced eruptions interspersed with more deliberate and slow keystrokes or cursor adjustment. I didn’t know how much of my writing consisted of *not*-typing, of not moving much at all. I didn’t know how the spacebar and return functioned similarly to delete – as staccato strikes at the beginning or end of a typing sequence. I observed involvement, emotional variation in and around in delete. I perceived struggle, false starts, cover-overs, possibly frustration in my attempts.

## VII. others

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But that's just me, of course – the typing-me from just the last few weeks at that. What does delete do for and with others?

Here is high school teacher, Yeazell, in word processing's earliest days, on the exciting pace made possible via delete: She says --

...–The actual typing is less threatening because it is a matter of a **quick** poke at a delete key to correct typos. When revising and proofreading, it is a **simple** process of punching a few keys and words are replaced, sentences are adjusted or deleted, and paragraphs are moved. And it's **fun**. ...~~To watch the screen and see these things happening so easily~~ is a **delight** when remembering the tedium of retyping or rewriting whole pages of copy” (25)

Yeazell's sentiments echo the 1974 Kleinschod report, which heralded – or advertised really- the revolutionary potential of word processing for the information workplace. As Kirschenbaum captures the words of Walter Kleinshod, with word processing, “Errors,” ... “are no longer sins of incompetence, destroyers of confidence” (34). There is simplicity and smoothness here circa 1980 – an easing of physical labor and time spent. The computer keyboard could even a signal a “complete freedom” not available in the typewriting that preceded it, or so declared Michael Crichton. Early keyboarding signaled control, safety, confidence, and even fun in delete and the broader move- or change-ability of text.

I just can't identify. I didn't notice much ease or delight in those recordings; though I did notice that my delete does seek simple surface code correctness, which appears to be habit and also some signal of failure in my uptake of the touch-typing educational regime I recall from grades 5-7. As Roth writes in '84, “I've watched many first-time users press the delete key one hundred times to erase a sentence rather than try one of the short-cuts offered by a powerful software package.” It me. And it's more.

## VIIb. others

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Gardner writes of the twin significance of keyboarding in his life - at the piano *and* at the computer. He supposes that "the experience of my fingers on keyboards feels like more than simply a means to a desired end. In the creation of both music and text, if I could bypass the keyboard and directly transmit mental signals to an instrument or to the computer, I would not want to do so" (49). One reason he posits for this insistence is cumulative memories of learning piano as a child—always a loved one, mother or brother, seated next to him, in care and practice. That familial connection and love reverberates into his present, as his children narrate back to him the comfort they associate with childhood memories of hearing him tapping at his computer.

Something would be lost in composing without the *play*. Keyboarding after all – playing piano or writing - is inventive and interpretive, rhetorical, and generative.

And as Brown and Rivers declare, “Each performance of QWERTY is virtuosic” (Brown and Rivers 223).

Next up would have been a little biography of the delete key, which I’m going to skip for time .....

## VIII. A Brief and Partial Biography of Delete [SKIP]

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Why is it *delete*? Why is *my* key labeled this way? If we each took out the QWERTYs we have on us, I bet we'd find range in the way the "get rid of this" key appears. For some, perhaps PC users, in the room, you might be so used to your own keys you are like, 'what is she even talking about? That key is called backspace'. Indeed.

It's generally true, I think, that on QWERTYs today this key is labeled either backspace, delete or maybe long backwards arrow. My MacBook Air keyboard has no Backspace only delete, while I gather that PC QWERTYs have *both* delete and backspace, in configurations varied and confounding (to me) (just look at these three keyboards my husband uses for work in his 4 screen set up – how can he possibly move across these varied terrains at once?). Just as there is no such thing as THE computer, Christina Hass reminds, because of the particularities of materiality, there is no THE keyboard (or QWERTY or delete key).

According to the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) the "QWERTY keyboard has remained largely unchanged ever since it was introduced in typewriters in the mid-1800s." One small yet significant difference, though, is in that erase function key, as what this key could and can do depends on the specific mechanics of the machine in question. On mechanical typewriters, for example, the backspace key would just do that. After pressing it one or multiple times to go back, typists could type over extant text if they could get away with it or pull the sheet of paper and start all over again. Or later, with the invention of correction fluid in 1956, they might blot out and patiently wait then basically for paint to dry. Eventually, in some electric typewriters, correction tape was or could be installed in the machine, meaning, as on the IBM Selectric II (ANSI) for instance, internal correction tape would remove selected characters and then be manually replaced by the user – a process similar to my birthday typewriter and the racket that erasing involved. While maybe the backspace or delete *keys themselves* have remained mostly unchanged, I note the sequences of embodied moves for conducting this "get rid of this" action has always been and is quite varied.

In the lore, a story I've encountered a lot, backspace on computer keyboards is supposed to be just an anachronistic misnomer, a holdover from prior technology, where backspace just moved the carriage or cursor back. As Quora poster Tim Morgan writes, "PC keyboards were traditionally bound to idiosyncrasies of typewriters and other predecessor technology. (It's where we get terms like 'carriage return.')

'Backspace' then literally meant moving the type guide back a space, to allow for overtyping." Erase or the like would be more accurate because backspace now also takes any preceding characters with it. As Morgan continues, "When Apple set out to reinvent the personal computer, they had hoped to shed some of these ties to the past, so they abolished overtyping mode and renamed the key to "delete."

The original Mac keyboard came out in 1983, the Apple Lisa. As demonstrated by The 8-Bit Guy on YouTube, it had in its familiar location, at the top right, that familiar key ... one neither Backspace nor delete, but just a left pointing long arrow! In 1984, the original Macintosh keyboard featured a key labeled ... Backspace! And also, 8-bit Guy observes, this one had "No arrow keys, no function keys, no number pad," bc "apparently Steve Jobs believed that everybody would use the mouse for everything, except typing." By 1986 and the Apple Desktop Bus Keyboard, that key is labeled delete on a board that seems to share configuration style with the early 1983 Apple IIe, which also had delete. So Mac has not exactly *always* foregone the Backspace key in favor of the supposedly more accurate delete. And on second thought too, going *back* and leaving new or freshly fertile *space* in its place perhaps actually makes the name quite fitting for what the modern backspace key performs. Delete is erase maybe, though erase invokes an even longer timeline of writing technology. And who knows why Jobs and others thought to rename this way. According to the Google Dictionary box, to delete is to "remove or OBLITERATE (written or printed material), especially by drawing a line through it or marking it with a delete sign." I'm drawn to that verb, obliterate.

→ In seeking a little bit of cultural history of delete, I also learned that my delete is able not only to erase where I've been, but also where I was going or have gone: *function + delete*, indeed, *erases forward*. Who knew. Many, I'm sure, but not me. I've literally never conceived of delete as means to move forward.

## IX. CONC

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I suspect delete has long driven changes in how we conceptualize drafts, revision, a written text or writing itself. I'm reminded of the rise of revision as a term in our journals in coordination with process and (word) processor. Maybe it's just more of the same now, only accelerated. Maybe my delete is symptomatic of what Gallagher has called the "update culture" of composing, a dynamic that describes digital writers not only revise easily and speedily, but that they *continue* to revise and reconsider after publication and circulation. Maybe, in the words of Micciche's thirteen-year-old, who when writing for school on Google Docs conveyed to her a profound sense of writing's multivocality and simply that, "Nothing is final" in matters of written expression (ix). To that teen at least, *that* is totally chill.

Maybe delete is an instinct; maybe the availability of this key trains *us*. Some time ago when a graduate student stopped by my office, I asked how their thesis was going. The student paused thoughtfully and, this isn't a quote, but said something like, "well, it's a series of saying things and then immediately regretting I've said them." We chuckled with recognition. Wide eyed and nodding, I replied: "Same. And I think that might just describe what *all writing* is, forever." Indeed, the delete key as my composing partner, as available means, both enables and delimits; it is the locus of struggle and its ease.

I can't picture writing on a keyboard without delete. That would change everything, perhaps make writing feel impossible, something like using a pencil without an eraser. Indeed the eraser on a pencil's tip, as Baron tells it, was at its time a "major technological advance[]" (31). Teachers, he says, already didn't allow cross outs and so, for a time, argued against the pencil eraser's use, "arguing that students would do better more premeditated work if they didn't have the option of revising" (31). Hard for me to picture the kind of writing work that could come for me in a one-shot, no cross outs performance. Something would surely be lost, possibly never started, in composing without the *play*.

## X.

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Jenny Rice writes, "the way that participants use equipment [is] a means of making sense of the world they already live with" (ER 380-1). I think my relationship with delete signals my making sense of a wide vulnerability I feel as a writer, a sense that pervades my writing, academic or mundane. High stakes or private.

*Writing is a series of immediate regrets that you've said something at all.*

And perhaps this horizon of feeling too betrays something more poisonous to any creative act. As Livingston writes about the author Anne Rice, "the writer must come face to face with a machine that demands she create not just perfect copy, but ideal creative thought. With all these tools at one's disposal, Rice writes, "There's really no excuse for not writing the perfect book."

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