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### Review of Matthew Kirschenbaum's *Mechanisms*

Matthew Kirschenbaum borrows his title from a poem by William Gibson. It was released as part of a project called *The Agrippa*, a book made to look like some kind of relic. The text itself consists of pages of genetic code. The only part we can read, Gibson's poem, appears on a floppy disk hidden in the book. It can only be used once, though. After being viewed, the poem appears to be attacked by some kind of virus. It disappears from the screen, gone forever, according to many accounts surrounding the *Agrippa*.

Is it really, though? This is one of the main themes in Kirschenbaum's book. He says the screen has somehow come to represent the computer. He complains that people care too much about how information is displayed (he calls this "formal materiality"). Kirschenbaum wants people to know "there are different access points to computing" (35). In this book, he talks about one that's often ignored—the hard drive (he also refers to this as the computer's "forensic materiality").

In his first chapter, Kirschenbaum says there are a few myths about the hard drive. For example, people often think computer files are ephemeral. Kirschenbaum, however, says we can always recover information. Files leave what he calls trace evidence or imprints of themselves. (In other words, the *Agrippa* isn't lost forever.) Another myth is that computer files are all the same. Kirschenbaum, though, says we can tell the difference between them by looking at their hashtags. They act as a kind of fingerprint (56). Finally, Kirschenbaum says people think computer files are fluid. There are a lot of times when they have to be stable, though. For example, online stores are protected by different kinds

of encryption software (56). Kirschenbaum concludes by saying the virtual is actually physical. It's made of information inscribed on hardware.

In his second chapter, Kirschenbaum talks about the history of the computer leading up to the invention of the hard drive. He then describes its different characteristics (89). He's very thorough. He talks about the hard drive in a way that's easy to understand. He begins by describing its physical characteristics. He says it's made of multiple platters. Each one is divided into tiny sectors (92). Clusters of a sector are inscribed with information; they don't necessarily have to be grouped together, though (93). Kirschenbaum also describes how a hard drive works. He says information is sent using an electrical signal (89). A needle then reads the platters, trying to detect changes in this signal (94).

In chapter three, Kirschenbaum shifts his focus a little. He applies his ideas about forensics to computer programs. First, he analyzes an old game called *Mystery House*. He looks at it using a program called *FishWings* (115). The game's text appears on the left of the screen, its code on the right (115-116). We see it was cracked at some point. There are remnants of another game in the code (127). Kirschenbaum then compares this view of *MysteryHouse* with how it looks in an emulator. This time we only see text and images. Kirschenbaum concludes by saying code by itself doesn't mean anything. He says "each software constructs ways of seeing" (119).

In chapter four, Kirschenbaum looks at Michael Joyce's *Afternoons*. He traces its history, using the author's notes. He talks less about the hard drive, though, and more about the history of *Storyspace*, the software Joyce used to write the story. Kirschenbaum also talks about the different versions of *Afternoons*. He asks, "What is the threshold by which mere variants in a text promote the text to the status of a new version of the work?" He says sometimes they're based more on changes to the structure of the story. For example, an edition was published on the internet in 1997 (189). This is usually considered the fourth version. Sometimes, though, versions are based more on changes to the text. For example, the second version of *Afternoons* includes more *lexias* (189).

In the last chapter, Kirschenbaum talks about Gibson's poem. He says there was a lot of talk about the Agrippa before it was ever released. People wrote about it on different internet message boards, creating a kind of mythos. Also, someone claiming to have cracked the Agrippa posted Gibson's poem on MindVox, an internet message board. Kirschenbaum says the internet acted as a kind of mechanism, helping to preserve Gibson's poem (221). While I agree, he spends so much time talking about the hard drive. I think he missed a great opportunity to apply his ideas about computer forensics to the Agrippa.

Kirschenbaum's book has interesting legal implications for bloggers. In a recent ruling, a Canadian court ordered people who left anonymous comments on a blog to reveal their names. Kirschenbaum's chapter about computer forensics, then, should serve as a warning. Just because you delete something doesn't mean it's gone. Your old blog posts can always be recovered.