

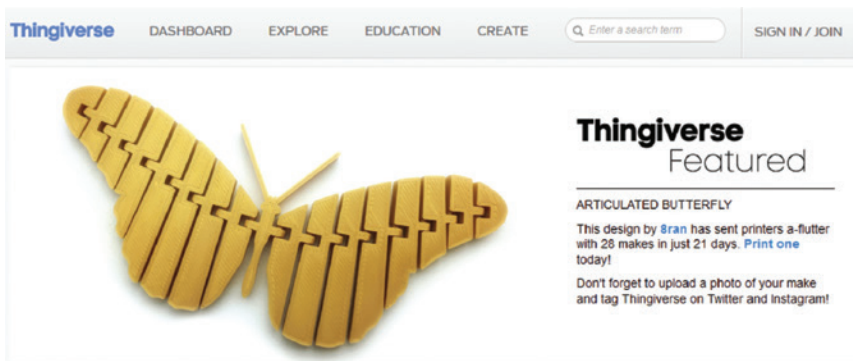


## Thingiverse: Archive and Enabler

Ursula Hurley

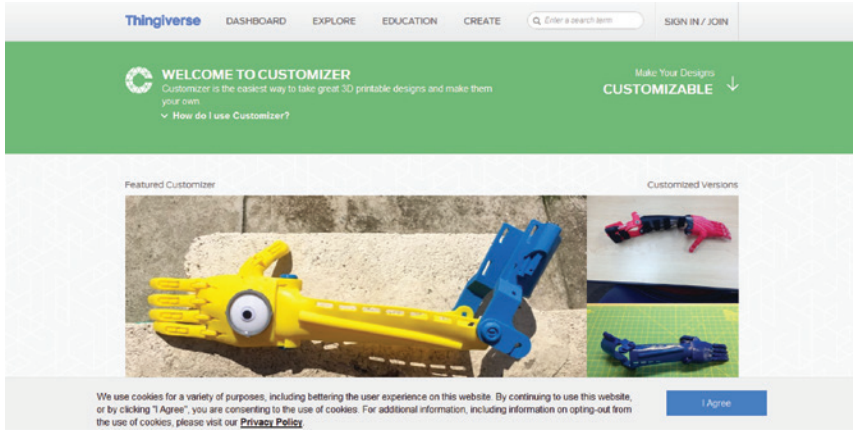
The University of Salford, UK

Thingiverse is an open-source website, showcasing the capabilities of 3D printers (<https://www.thingiverse.com/>). Hosted by Makerbot Industries, one of the largest manufacturers of 3D printers, the site encourages users to share designs under a Creative Commons license. In excess of one million designs have been uploaded to date, ranging from the practical to the frivolous. Blueprints for customisable prosthetic limbs are shared alongside cup-holders and mischievous re-workings of well known cartoon characters. The site is structured like a fairly standard online community, with professional curators and peer-to-peer comment, with no restrictions on use beyond what is legal.

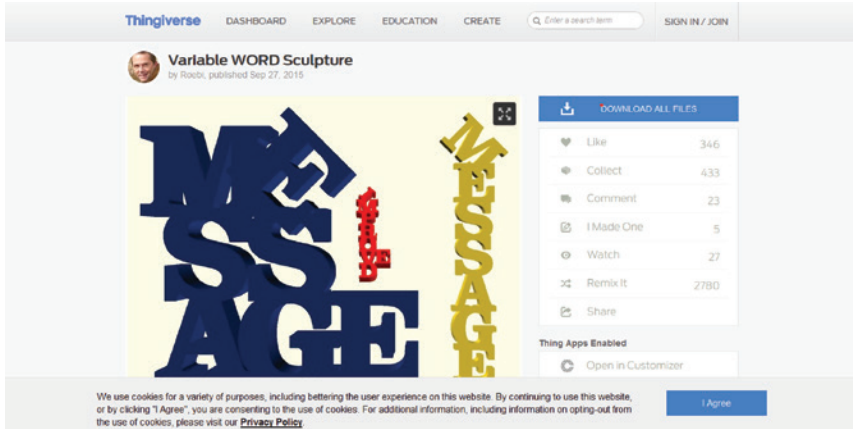


However, beyond the basic structures, something fascinating is evolving within the content. What I find compelling about this site is not just the range of ingenuity but also, beyond the usual capabilities of a social network, where one can “like” or otherwise respond to a post, here one can

download the source file and physically materialise it in one's own location. The object can be replicated exactly, or it can be customised by the downloader, should their design skills be sufficient. Anyone who wants to acquire or refine such skills can turn to peer support for advice.



In terms of this site's relevance to digital life writing, one could argue that Thingiverse forms both archive and enabler of 3D-printable objects. It charts not only the development of the technology's capabilities, but also the uses to which people choose to put it. Each object posted is the result of many hours of work; such investments of time and effort are motivated by life experiences, needs, imaginings and aspirations. As a self-regulating database, which is fluid and always developing, the site provides the raw material for a cultural history of digital fabrication, in which someone's efforts to add Mickey Mouse ears to a bust of Darth Vader may one day seem as primitive as a cave painting. What else can this technology do? The truth is that we don't know, but sites like this can help us to find out. Cultural subversion and boundary testing combine with powerful knowledge sharing in which designer and end-user begin to merge in a potential disruption of the capitalist system. The objects uploaded to Thingiverse might therefore be read as culturally and politically significant, and as auto/biographical materials in their own right. The clearest case for more obviously textual readings might be seen in this variable word sculpture:



In effect, this design offers the technical parameters for anyone who wants to customise and print their own text. Content, font and colour are all easily changed. The time and effort involved in creating such 3D text implies a choice of word similar to poetic concentration—form will influence content.

Finally, what also interest me from a digital life writing point of view are the commentaries that people choose to post alongside their designs. Here someone has created a Julius Caesar pen holder, but in the space allotted for technical commentary and advice, offers a history lesson, and in fact a ‘corrective’ to Shakespeare’s version, pointing out that:

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‘Unlike in the Shakespeare play, Caesar’s last words were not “Et tu, Brute?” (“And you, Brutus?”). Instead they were reported as “You, too, my child?”’

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This maker thinks it important not only to deliver accurate technical data, but to ensure anyone materialising a Julius Caesar pen holder has the right version of the Roman Emperor’s final moments. One is prompted to imagine each person who downloads and makes this object, holding the effigy of Caesar, noble of countenance and porcupined by pens. Furthermore, one wonders what Caesar himself would make of digital fabrication, what he might choose to make, what this choice might tell us about him, and how what we imagine for him might reveal something about ourselves.

The screenshot shows a Thingiverse page for a 3D model titled "Julius Caesar (Improved) Pen/Pencil Holder" by user "doratted", published on Sep 16, 2017. The main image shows a white bust of Julius Caesar with several pens and pencils inserted into its back. To the right of the image is a statistics table and a list of actions. Below the image is a cookie consent banner.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ursula Hurley is Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at the University of Salford. She works critically and creatively in experimental and innovative auto/biographical practices, ranging from historical, fictionalized narratives to digitally fabricated artifacts. She is in the process of completing a book-length project on disability and digital fabrication. Email: U.K.Hurley@salford.ac.uk.