"Sergey Brin is Batman": Google Glass and the Rhetoric of Adoption in Popular Networked Culture

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"Sergey Brin Finally Lets Someone Else Wear Google Glass"

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The emergence, anticipation, and celebration of Google Glass are cause for reflection. Google proclaims that it is instigating a new era in human-computer interaction or what some are calling our *digital life*. On one level, Glass is a prototype for a transparent computer display worn over one eye that offers an augmented reality viewpoint, slated to be made available to consumers at some point in the future. On another level, Glass is a promise, one that plays out in the context of numerous social media and real-world events leveraging the claim that Glass will become a new computer platform.

Glass is framed in news media as the brainchild of Sergey Brin, the American computer scientist of Russian descent who co-founded Google. Brin is also mythologized in online articles as a real life "Batman" who is developing a secret facility resembling the "Batcave" (Lynley), adding fuel to the fire behind Glass. Glass has also graced the face of legendary clothing designer Diane von Fürstenberg who wore it at New York Fashion Week 2012, illustrating Google's strategically planned photo opportunities which play on the public's zeal for device fetishism (Gorman). Yet, Google's persuasive tactics have a broader reach than simply product placement. Chronologically, Glass's first public instantiation was through a YouTube concept video titled "Project Glass: One Day…" (released April 4, 2012, 2:31 minutes in length) that frames it as the first mainstream augmented reality wearable eye display, and for the sake of simplicity, we will refer to this video simply as One Day.

Having been viewed more than 20 million times (Google, 2012), One Day has morphed into a viral marketing campaign. In the video, Google promises that Glass will comprise a fleet of features that will enable us to take videos, interact with personal contacts, and

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navigate maps, amongst other things, all without the cumbersome use of a hand-held smartphone. More so, it promises a lifestyle. In one blog post, Google states that "A team within our Google X group started Project Glass to build this kind of technology, one that helps you explore and share your world, putting you back in the moment" (Brin). Nearly a year after its first public mention, Google launched a massive social media campaign called #ifIhadglass in conjunction with its Google Explorer Program. Running for only a week in February 2013, thousands of Internet users sent tweets and blog posts using the hashtag #ifIhadglass, competing for the chance to purchase the device in a pre-release scenario. Each person was encouraged to disclose a personal reason for wanting Google Glass; eight thousand hopefuls "won" the opportunity to buy the device before everyone else. Despite Glass still not being available as a consumer product well over a year later, its reach remains significant. As authors, we are interested in the early or pre-2013 impact of Glass when the sensationalized public revealed so many motives about technology and the future that Glass seemingly creates for us.

Above all other categories, Google Glass is a computer that features a "Heads-Up" eye Display (HUD) that does not require one's hands for most interactions (see figure 1). The computer graphics appear over the wearer's field of vision. It might also be termed a Head-Mounted Display (HMD) because it rests on the head, literally using the ears to keep it up like a regular pair of glasses. For most of its processes, it requires a connection to the Internet. It is classified as augmented reality because of the computer-generated graphics that it produces using a transparent screen, which does not occlude one's view of the real world. Google promotes Glass as an extension of the current smartphone, meaning that it offers the basic functionality of the iPhone -- for example: texting, recording videos, browsing the Internet, etc. – from a first-person viewpoint. For most people, eye displays are not considered "everyday" technology. This is the major conceptual hurdle that Google faces.

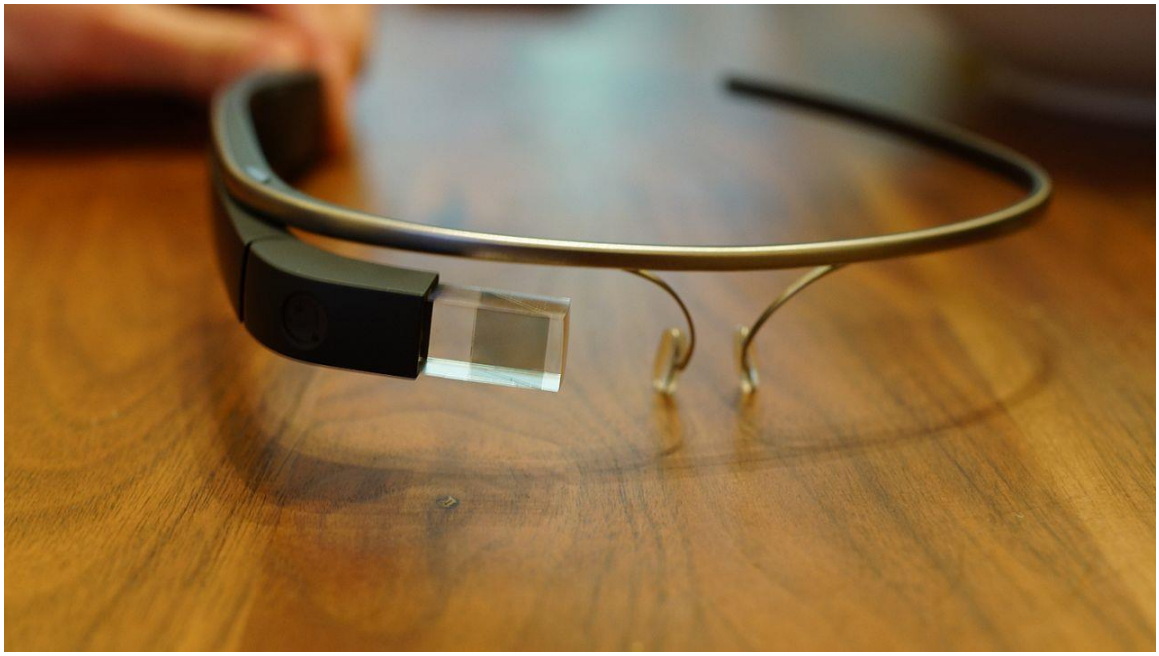

Figure 1: Google Glass Explorer Edition: Google's augmented reality head mounted display as glass form (This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.)

The first appearance of Glass was on Sergey Brin who wore it to an April 5, 2012 public event in San Francisco. Provocative headlines emerged such as “Google ‘Project Glass’ Replaces the Smartphone with Glasses” (Albanesius) and “Google X Labs: First Project Glass, next space elevators?” (LaMonica). We argue that Glass’s birth signifies not only a marketing phenomenon heralding a technological prototype, it also suggests and speculates that Glass’s popularization is a rhetorical instigator for the adoption of a new paradigm in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), the wearable eye display. Glass’s process of adoption operates in the context of mainstream and popular culture discourses, a phenomenon that transforms over time as the idea accrues a greater audience. More, we argue that most salient of all during this span of time is the way Google Glass is framed in media as the brainchild of Sergey Brin. The promise of Glass, the rhetorical strategy that Google uses in these first months to persuade the public to embrace the eye display platform relies upon the ethos of Sergey Brin.

Glenn Stillar writes that "Rhetoric deals with language's role in identification and division among social agents; it focuses on the exchange of discourse as a central mode through which social orders are constructed and transformed through addressed symbolic action" (62). Our methodology is to concentrate on the first emergence of Glass in mainstream discourses. We treat it as a media phenomenon through three text clusters that play out in a quasi-linear way (see figure 2). For the first cluster, we also observed and collected the content of Google's YouTube social media campaign and sampled several videos produced by Google that announce and celebrate the coming of Glass. Here we offer a basic reading of the One Day video released on April 4, 2012 and analyze it using Burke's codicil concerning "perfection." ("Poem" 263). The second cluster analyzes how Sergey Brin's character is framed in public responses as a larger-than-life persona, a modern day Batman amid an ideology that promotes perfectionist, transhuman values. To chart this rhetoric, we moved backward in time to the fall of 2011 in order to understand the rhetorical grounds upon which Glass emerges before April 4, 2012. For the third cluster, our study draws on the discourse analysis of a corpus of 1,000 mainstream print news articles, and online media pieces spanning February 2012 to November 2012 that mention Google Glass. During this time, and surrounding the release of the promotional video, Glass was celebrated and hyped extensively in mainstream print media. All three clusters of texts signify the impact of Google Glass before Glass existed as a material consumer artifact for the public. We see this particular span of time as an opportunity to study the rhetorical and tactical performance led by Google to cast Glass as a new computer platform in the midst of prevailing discourses that had never before dealt with wearable computing in a mass communication milieu.

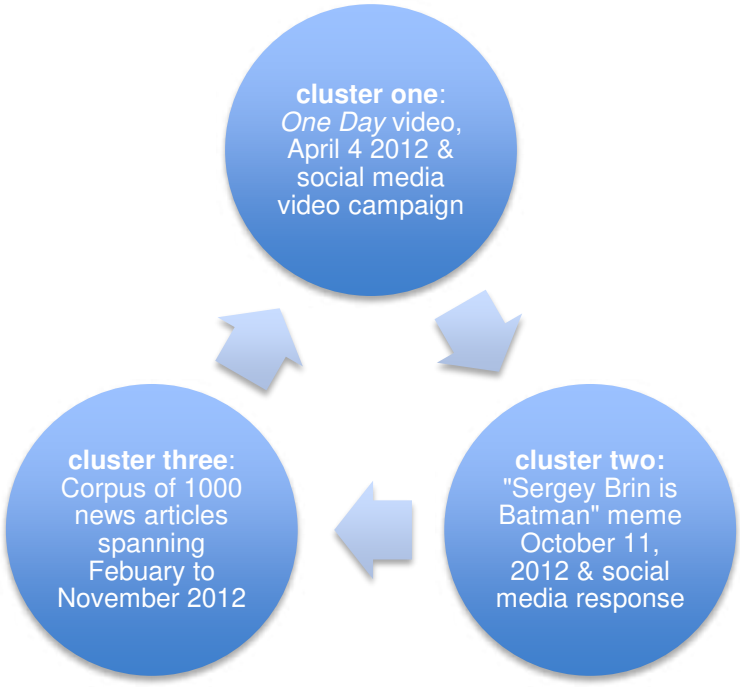

Figure 2: Discourse Analysis Model for Three Text Clusters

Previous work grounds some of the claims made in this chapter. Pedersen's *Ready to Wear: A Rhetoric of Wearable Computers and Reality-Shifting Media* makes the argument that discourses of augmented reality and specifically those associated with wearables are vulnerable to rhetoric that frames an imminent technological future for society without exploration or even appropriate definition. By embracing new inventions like Glass, through the language of announcement without attending to embedded (mis)assumptions about humans and nonhumans, we pave a future for ourselves that might be detrimental. In other relevant work, Encheva and Pedersen consider the Google Glass One Day marketing video by identifying it as an instance of *predictive advertising*. Arguing for predictive advertising as a hybrid form using Baudrillard's "integral reality," they argue that Google capitalizes both on the futuristic techno-fantasy of the narrative as well as the realism of it as a cinematic construct, simultaneously framing it as a fact as well as fiction. Finally, Pedersen and Simcoe argue that the Iron Man phenomenon is an exemplar to reveal how popular culture films and their surrounding discursive vocabularies generate not only a fan following, but also motivate amateur augmented

reality inventors (Pedersen and Simcoe, 2012). Many other writers take a critical humanities approach to new media including Paul Virilio (*Information Bomb*), Mark Andrejevic (*iSpy)*, Janon Lanier (*You Are Not A Gadget).* Working on the ontological and metaphysical plane are philosophers who treat this friction not as a binary between human and nonhuman media devices; rather, following Bruno Latour they understand the associative or networked relationship amongst entities. In this vein, Katherine Hayles writes, "contemporary technogenesis implies continuous reciprocal causality between human bodies and technics" (*How We Think* 123).

This chapter takes a much broader view of the Glass phenomenon arguing that Glass's emergence needs to be contextualized according the constructed persona of Sergey Brin both before and during Google's promotional campaign. In simple terms, without Brin as the instigator, Glass would not be considered worthy of the kind of fame it enjoys. Nor would augmented reality itself be seen as a viable new medium of communication for everyday people. However, in more complex terms, the rhetorical positioning of Brin is a by-product not only of planned media events, it is also due to social media response and online memes that amount to provocative rumors. In order to understand Glass as an augmented reality consumer device being thrust upon us, we need to attend to how it is framed amid value-systems, ideologies, and culture.

One Day and Augmented Reality

In a sense, One Day serves as a definition for augmented reality authored by Google. Realizing that augmented reality had laboured under the weight of awkward definitions for decades, Google chose to offer a simplified version of the technology, a *day in the life of* video featuring a young urban *flâneur* who we could admire. In the course of the video, Google's character wakes, has breakfast, wanders the city, visits a bookshop, admires street art, drinks coffee, meets a friend, and shares an intimate moment with a girlfriend at sunset. Even before one confronts his augmented or virtual life, one desires his lackadaisical existence and his short perfect little day. He is decadent, cultured, and indulged.

The portrait of augmented reality is quite specific. Google's character yawns, stretches and waits as an array of fourteen virtual icons appear before him that signify a calendar, voice commands, Google search, time, weather, friend chat, camera, and several other recognizable smartphone features. Over the rest of the video, we observe him using these icons to make his pedestrian trip around his neighborhood easier (e.g., first-person viewpoint), more delightful (e.g., locate a friend in a store), free of any hindrance (e.g. alternative map routes when the subway fails). What is innovative is the feeling that over his field of vision pops up his virtual friend, his *Jeeves*. And the overwhelming message is that *Glass as Jeeves* will stroll around with this character augmenting his reality in a manner that makes it even more serendipitous than before.

The One Day video functions to normalize what augmented reality as a platform is for, the tasks it can fulfill and the potentials it reveals. It offers us a way to live that seems more perfect than the way we live now. Burke argues that humans are goaded by a perfection principle. Basing his "definition of human" partly on the Aristotelian notion of *entelechy* ("possession of telos within" or having its own end within itself) (Burke, *Symbols* 71), Burke defines humans as always striving for a state of completion or full actuality (*Grammar* 261). He ironically labels us "Rotten with Perfection" ("Poem" 263). Humans attach this sense of entelechy onto logonomic systems and work to attain perfection in a way that is as destructive as it is constructive (Stillar 87). Also influenced by Burke, Michael Hyde calls it "both a benefit and a burden" (4) in his book *Perfection: Coming to Terms with Being Human*. These Glass videos narrate a utopian future where life is ordered by a pre*script*ive personal computer, a Jeeves who will always be there. The character in One Day lives a mediated life whereby no task such as building his calendar, navigating a bookstore, or meeting friends suffers any interruption. Augmented Reality translates to a life of seamless bliss. Reminiscent of both the augmented life of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the saccharin sweet utopia of the film *Pleasantville*, One Day promotes a perfect world and perfected digital lifestyle that is hard to resist.

Google planned the April 4 2012 release of the One Day video as an event motivated to enact more than the announcement of a new product, which in weeks quickly garnered 18,762,646 views. The release also coincided with the start of Sergey

Brin's scheduled media appearances wearing Glass which began on April 5. Over the spring and summer of 2012, several other concept videos emerged introducing the public to Google Glass and the fascinating potential for this new computer platform. Most salient are "Project Glass: Trampoline Video" (May 24, 2012: 716,460 views) and "Project Glass: Live Demo At Google I/O" (June 27, 2012: 1,092,418 views). A "media event" has been defined as a live, televised event that marks or changes history (Dayan and Katz 212). It usually implies that everyday people anticipate such a live event, plan to watch it and remember it in a personal way (e.g., The inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 29, 2009). However, the rise of a networked Internet society has morphed the notion of "media event" considerably given that news is accessible to people constantly across myriad digital communication channels. Tweets interrupt one's breakfast with information that one would never have experienced until the six o'clock news hour on television. Manuel Castells conceptualizes the network society as "the social structure resulting from the interaction between the new technological paradigm and social organization at large" (Castells, 3). Our notions of what is newsworthy have morphed due to networked access to news. However, what has not morphed is the impact and affective reaction that people experience personally in response to news events.

From here, this chapter moves outward from One Day in order to explain Glass amid a broader rhetorical landscape, one that takes into account its fame within the context that precedes it.

Augmented Reality Eye Displays

The first chapter of Everett M. Rogers' work *The Diffusion of Innovations* opens by pinpointing the crux of the issue for most new technology:

> Getting a new idea adopted, even when it has obvious advantages, is difficult. Many innovations require a lengthy period of many years from the time when they become available to the time when they are widely adopted. Therefore, a common problem for many individuals and organizations is how to speed up the rate of diffusion of an innovation. (1)

The urgency in Google Glass lies in the fact most public discussion over eye displays stems from fictional portrayals, making Glass seem unbelievable or simply a trope of fiction or cinema. Science fiction and popular references to the eye display are almost too numerous to list, but most are featured in military uses: Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* from the 1984 film had implanted eye technology that let him identified possible targets using augmented reality vision. Tom Cruise's Maverick in *Top Gun* had a rudimentary display to indicate an enemy plane's target acquisition and current G-forces. Many first-person shooter video games, including Bungie's landmark series *Halo* feature eye displays that gives the player real-time status updates on player enemy locations, shield levels, remaining ammunition and waypoint information. Indeed, gamers will have no trouble understanding what Google Glass hopes to contribute to their real lives, as the experience of a virtual head's up display laid over top of a virtual world is commonplace. Interestingly, while many film and television shows are adding HUDs to their storytelling to add a science fiction or futuristic feel, there is a movement in game development away from any the very HUD that Google proposes as many gamers consider them to be "screen clutter" and block a player's view of a created world. The video game series *Dead Space* by Electronic Arts is an exemplar of this new style: traditional game information such as health and ammunition have been woven into character design, allowing for an unobstructed view. Game developers and Google developers, ironically, are advancing their respective technologies in opposing directions. While Google seeks to enhance real-life with augmented reality, game developers are trying to streamline from their fictional worlds any and all visual distractions.

Real heads-up eye displays are not new either, but they are also geared to specific audiences rather than the general public. The *Land Warrior* system, developed by the U.S. army over the past decade, for example, includes a heads-up eye display with an augmented reality visual overlay for soldier communication. Many well-known inventors have contributed eye display technology, research or applications over the past two decades including Steve Mann (Visual Memory Prosthetic), Thad Starner (Remembrance Agent), and Rob Spence (Eyeborg). Commercially, Vuzix is a company that currently manufactures transparent eye displays for entertainment.

Significant to this chapter is the fact that wearable eye displays and augmented reality have not been embraced in the mainstream as a legitimate computer platform in the league of the smartphone or the laptop, that emerged as remediations of traditional phones and desktops computers. This chapter charts the curious mainstreaming of augmented reality and the persuasive tactics that accompany it.

"Sergey Brin is Batman"

On October 25, 2011, *Business Insider* published an article called "Googlers Are Passing Around A Crazy Rumor About Sergey Brin Working On Architecture" that opened with a provocative claim:

> 'Sergey Brin is Batman.' That's the meme flying around the Google office, several sources within the company have told us. While Brin has a number of pet projects, the most interesting one is a potential project involving architecture." (Lynley)

This article frames Brin as Batman and it paves the way for much press on the Google X Lab, the real-life secret lab that is touted to be developing a space elevator, a self-driving car, and the now imminent Google Glass. In subsequent articles by the same writer, there is mention of a rumour that Brin is creating an architectural blueprint for a "Batcave." We also sampled blog posts by non-professional individuals who circulated this meme as blog-worthy news. "Sergey Brin is Batman" operates as social capital amongst those who are genuinely interested in what Google is inventing as well as those who are simply sensationalized by the idea. The circulation of the "Sergey Brin is Batman" meme is significant on several fronts. First, it was never promoted by Google itself; enthusiasts framed Brin in this manner as a humorous response to the flood of futuristic inventions coming out of Google. Second, the notion of Sergey Brin being Batman was established before Glass was announced. His fictional framing as a superhero, a cyborg identity, was established grounds upon which Glass enters the discourse. In a sense, the meme functions through what Kenneth Burke terms *familial substance,* which is rhetoric that is concerned with the network of relations to other things, an ancestry of sorts (*Grammar* 26-29). By naming the substance, the *whatness* of a thing in the world, one can name what is intrinsic to it (what it is) as well as what is extrinsic (what it is not) (*Grammar*

23). In more simple terms, no one really believes Brin is Batman; the rhetorical act frames Google as an entity that can produce a superhuman/transhuman future for us using familial terms. The emergence of Glass, a dream for an augmented reality future, sits on the same persuasive substance established by a public following.

Further to our ongoing study, we identified a trend in our second cluster in print and online news articles. The name "Sergey Brin" appears 713 times in the corpus of 1,000 print and online news articles about Google Glass. Often the story concentrates on Brin's activities, comments, whereabouts, and future expectations amid news of Glass as a technology that only exists as an artifact of the press for the public. The overwhelming appearance of his name, more so than any other Google employee, led to the realization that Brin's larger–than-life persona functioned as rhetorically significant. Rupert Till explains the definition of how an individual must amass popular fame in order to form a "cult of personality":

> A celebrity is someone who is well known for being famous, and whose name alone is recognizable, associated with their image, and is capable of generating money. . . For a star to progress to a point where they are described as a popular icon requires their achievement of a level of fame at which they are treated with the sort of respect traditionally reserved for religious figures. In order to be described as a popular icon, a star has to become a religious figure, to develop their own personality cult and recruit followers" (47).

While it would be a stretch to call Brin a pop cult icon, the point is that Google Glass and the constructed *character* of Sergey Brin co-create each other, generating the kind of popularity often reserved for celebrities like Bill Gates, the late Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg. However, no computer platform has been popularized and sensationalized at such an early stage and so uniquely.

Brin – human, inventor, entrepreneur, PhD, millionaire, Batman – provides the required credibility or ethos to make Google Glass and its augmenting abilities plausible. According to Aristotle:

> Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided…his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses." Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.2.p. 7.

Ethos is a highly contested term which has been explored extensively by philosophers and rhetoricians and this chapter is not the site for a new discussion (Smith). However, Craig Smith emphasizes how Aristotle meant for ethos to be taken as the public manifestation of a character:

> For Aristotle, it is a given: everyone has *ethos* whether it be noble or ignoble. Before one even speaks, that *ethos* has an ontological dimension because it emerges from the way one makes decisions, the way one lives on a day-to-day basis, the way one dwells. Those decisions are informed by one's values, one's practical wisdom, and one's goodwill all of which are addressed in detail by Aristotle. Thus, Aristotle *assumes* the knowledge of the Athenian fore-structure of *ethos* as a dwelling place and then reformulates the notion of dwelling place to present a rhetorical understanding of ethos. As an empiricist, he examines not what is given in the culture, but the notion of ethos as the *public* manifestation of a person. (2)

Smith makes the point that ethos is not simply the portrait of a speaker *being good*, he accounts for the situated and embodied dimension of ethos that is akin to the notion of dwelling within or through a culture instantiated in public forums in manner that is commensurate with public desires. By dubbing Sergey Brin "Batman," technology enthusiasts heroize his persona according to a common or recognizable and desired value system.

Fascination with the Batman Myth

What does it mean for public discourse to yoke Brin and ultimately the emergence of Google's innovations to the fictional persona of Batman? And how does the metaphor operate rhetorically as a marker of ethos?

Created by comic artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, Batman first appeared in Detective Comics #27 in May of 1939. In the 70 years since, Batman has achieved iconic status in comic books, film, television, animation and video games. Batman's tale of billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne who fights crime from the shadows by night runs counter to almost all other superhero archetypes, aside from Tony Stark's Iron Man. Whereas almost all other superheroes have been bestowed with superpowers from cosmic radiation, genetic mutation or laboratory accidents, Bruce Wayne is an everyman who defeats his foes with guile, fear, and technological genius. Batman's moral code prohibits him from killing his enemies, and this restriction on his behavior has led to the creation of many devices to subdue, defeat and restrain opponents in non-lethal fashion.

While British agent James Bond also featured many of his own gadgets that have now come to fruition (cameras the size of credit cards, radio receivers that slip in one's ear canal), the fact that 007 was given his technology from the British government does not grant the secret agent the level of ethos that Batman and Brin have obtained. While Bond's many gizmos have often saved the day, 007 himself has no respect for technology. He often is frequently admonished by lab advisor Q to treat his gear with care but then destroys it in the pursuit of his mission. Indeed, the most recent Bond film *SkyFall* (2012) features a Bond so frustrated with his inability to cope with modern technology used by his enemies that his solution to protect the life of MI6 leader M is to take her "back in time," and hide her at an abandoned farmhouse using nothing more than an ancient shotgun, booby-traps and his wits.

A more comparable character to Brin than 007 would be Marvel Comics' Spider-Man's alternate ego Peter Parker who invented his wearable webshooters in the bedroom of his uncle's house. Like Spider-Man, Batman's wearable technology was created out of one man's necessity, and it is this archetype of the lone scientist working in domestic isolation for the common good that fueled much of today's modern technology: one only has to look at the early years of Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Sergey Brin to see the real-life equivalent of a genius who ignores social convention in dogged pursuit of a vision.

As the mythology of Batman evolved past ink strokes on comic paper, so too did Batman's means of procuring his technology. While Tony Stark of Iron Man is internationally famous for being a genius inventor, Bruce Wayne is seen more as a savvy investor and playboy than having any great technological prowess. The invention of the microchip in 1959 ultimately destined Batman's gear to become increasingly computerized, and his mythology evolved to suit the then modern era. Rather than add computer programming and hardware development to Batman's long list of world caliber skills, the comics saw the introduction of a character named Lucius Fox. Played by Morgan Freeman in the Christopher Nolan trilogy, Fox works as the research head of Wayne Enterprises' Applied Science Division and supplies Batman with much of his portable technology. This evolution of the Batman mythos runs the Caped Crusader parallel to James Bond in that both figures have access to cutting edge technology developed not in isolation, but by teams of highly skilled professionals working with near limitless financial and technological resources — much like the modern day equivalent of Google.

While the original Batman was able to toil away in the solitude of the Batcave to serve the greater good, the evolved Batman makes use of a team, which remains unaware of its technology's ultimate usage.

The Batcave can also be construed as a metaphor for the allure generated by "Google X," which appears in the corpus of our study 273 times under several descriptors, such as "laboratory," "team," "project," "research group," and set of "engineers." The word "secret" occurs 206 times, emphasizing Google X's positioning as a mysterious location where innovation occurs. The corpus exudes unwavering confidence surrounding Google X. Most significant of all, the word "future" occurs 735 times suggesting that Google is creating the future that we will all ultimately fulfill. By clinging to the mystery surrounding Google X, and fantasizing it fictional terms, the discourse betrays a utopic future.

Interestingly, modern science fiction must intrigue readers with its portrayal of what might be, and the development of the smartphone made much of Batman and James

Bond's once-futuristic technology obsolete. A child who has grown up with an iPad would not be impressed with Batman's older technology, and so both Batman's mythology and his tech must evolve to stay relevant for his audience. While it's difficult to see the practical commercial application of Batman's portable shark repellent from the 1960s the eventual transformation from low-tech camp to a high tech wizardry is profound. The high tech display that lets Batman see otherwise invisible objects through visual depictions of sonar waves in *The Dark Knight* has almost limitless applications, be they military, medical, or civilian. Celebrating the future, (super)heroes marching onward, shunning technological obsolescence and cloaking innovation in secrecy as value-systems function in fiction and they are very much mirrored in the discourse surrounding Google Glass.

Conclusion

There will come a day when Google Glass is considered obsolete and will only be available for viewing in a museum, when wearable computers using augmented reality are as ubiquitous as people and when fiber optic transfer speeds seem sluggish. Google's approach is to bring Glass into public social networks before it emerges, minimizing consumer's struggle with adopting the device and thus maximizing its potential. Google generates a culture and a mass mainstream following for Glass as a new computer platform by mediating how it is introduced to the public. Media emergence now operates at a speed that makes analyzing models of adoption difficult. While applicable research has been conducted on the adoption of "hyped technologies," (Hedman, 2010), we live in a world now where the consumption, celebration, and entertainment of proposed technologies (or technology proposals) run rampant. Google Glass – desired, sensationalized, despised and feared, before one can even buy it – is bound up in popular and public culture and it affords us the opportunity to study this rhetorical process on as mass scale.

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Note: Portions of this chapter were drawn from:

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