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Analyzing Digital Fiction

Edited by
Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin,
and Hans Kristian Rustad

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Analyzing Digital Fiction

Written for and read on a computer screen, digital fiction pursues its verbal, discursive and conceptual complexity through the digital medium. It is fiction whose structure, form, and meaning are dictated by the digital context in which it is produced and requires analytical approaches that are sensitive to its status as a digital artifact. *Analyzing Digital Fiction* offers a collection of pioneering analyses based on replicable methodological frameworks. Chapters include analyses of hypertext fiction, Flash fiction, Twitterfiction, and video games with approaches taken from narratology, stylistics, semiotics, and ludology. Essays propose ways in which digital environments can expand, challenge, and test the limits of literary theories that have, until recently, predominantly been based on models and analyses of print texts.

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Introduction

1 From Theorizing to Analyzing Digital Fiction

Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Kristian Rustad

Why write a book on analyzing digital fiction? Twenty-five years after the publication of the first hypertext fictions, we might assume that a substantial body of in-depth analyses of digital fiction exists. In our many discussions as members of the Digital Fiction International Network[1], however, we established that it does not. Indeed, we were struck by how few systematic analyses of digital fiction are to be found. We realized that while authors have been experimenting with different modes and media, creating different structures and forms, and writing in different genres and styles, the scholarship surrounding digital fiction hasn't yet caught up. We concluded that the field needs more analyses of digital fiction and more replicable approaches through which they can be methodically analyzed.

We were also surprised to see how few of the existing approaches to digital fiction put their trust in the literary work itself, and to acknowledge that these works and their authors say something important about literature as an art form, about the media ecology of our time, and about our society and cultural practices. Too often, we felt, arguments about the importance of digital fiction are found, not within the text, but outside the fictional work. The mainstream media heralds a digital age in which we read literature differently (i.e. on screen), in which digital technologies will make readers fit for the twenty-first century (i.e. on trend), and in which literature needs to be where the readers are (i.e. online). We believe that these arguments are important and that digital fiction should and must have a place in our increasingly digital lives. However, claims about the timeliness or cultural relevance of digital fiction are not alone sufficient for justifying the value of and the position of digital fiction in our education system, in scholarship, or in society generally. Digital literature is a form of *literature*, and digital fiction is a form of *fiction*. Research in digital fiction thus needs to return to, to hold onto, and to expand the core practice of literary studies, and that, to our minds, is the methodical *analysis* of texts.

To that end, this volume provides a collection of systematic, comprehensive, and explicit applications of different methodological approaches to digital fiction. It offers analyses of digital works that have so far received little or no analytical attention and, in the spirit of the Routledge Studies in

Stylistics and Rhetoric series, profiles replicable methodologies that can be used in the analyses of other digital fictions.

SCOPE

Digital fiction, as defined by the Digital Fiction International Network, is "fiction [that is] written for and read on a computer screen [and] that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium" (Bell et al. 2010). It is fiction whose structure, form, and meaning are dictated by, and in dialogue with, the digital context in which it is produced and received.

The roots of digital fiction can be seen in the Interactive Fictions (IFs) of the 1980s. IFs such as Infocom's (1980) *Zork* and Adam Cadre's (1999) *Varicella* require the reader to type text commands in order to navigate the fiction, with the storyworld changing in response to their input. Later digital fictions, which were produced pre-Web, in software such as HyperCard and Storyspace and then in Web technologies such as HTML and Flash, take a range of forms but, like IFs, require that the reader engages with the digital technology either corporeally and cybernetically through mouse clicks or cognitively by making decisions about her or his journey through the text.

Aarseth (1997) defines digital fictions as "ergodic literature". In such texts, he argues, "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1). While Aarseth's definition does not explicitly exclude print texts, his concept of nonergodic literature shows why a linear and bound print text does not satisfy the criteria associated with ergodic literature. In nonergodic literature, he states, "no extranoematic responsibilities [are] placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages" (1–2). The nontrivial effort that Aarseth identifies in ergodic literature generally is characterized in digital fiction by the role that readers have to play in its navigation so that their reading experience is much more active or "nontrivial" than that associated with their print counterparts. Some demand that the reader follows hyperlinks in order to navigate the text. In Michael Joyce's (1987) Storyspace fiction, *afternoon, a story*, the choices that are granted to the reader result in different and sometimes contradictory narrative outcomes. In Lance Olsen and Tim Guthrie's (2005) Web-based fiction *10:01*, the reader can navigate the text using either a chronological timeline along the bottom of the screen or by clicking on an image of a particular character. Readers can also choose internal and/or external links as their curiosity dictates. *10:01* does not contain the narrative contradictions of *afternoon*, but the navigational choices mean that it is different each time it is read either by the same or a different reader. Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph's (2007) *Inanimate Alice* does not permit the same level of choice as *afternoon* or *10:01* insofar as the reader

is only offered one pathway through the text. However, readers are required to interact with the narrative by clicking on moving images, completing puzzles or selecting icons. Other digital fictions, such as geniwate and Deena Larsen's (2003) flash fiction *The Princess Murderer*, require that readers choose their own path through the text but also verge on literary games as they reflect subtextually on stereotypical ludic semantics, such as misogynist teleology (Ensslin and Bell 2012). Indeed, creative new media are increasingly blurring conventional generic boundaries, thus becoming hybrid forms of experimental literary and media art. Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph's (2010) *Flight Paths* is a prime example of digital fiction in participatory Web culture, as it integrates readers' story versions in its collaborative paratextual website. Each reading of a digital fiction is different, either because the reader takes a different pathway through the text or because the text offers a different version of itself.

LOGISTICAL DIFFICULTIES

That multilinear digital fiction is different each time it is read means that determining a "reading" of these texts is inherently problematic. Higgason (2003a) defines hypertext fiction in particular as a "scholar's nightmare" because of the logistical problems associated with its analysis, but the same could apply to a range of digital fictions because of the role that the reader plays in their construction. Higgason warns that "many of the old concepts of what it means to do criticism will be challenged by and changed to address new types of texts, and the standards by which we judge academic rigor will need to change in the process". It was perhaps the novelty of the digital fiction reading experience that led the first wave of digital fiction scholars to look toward poststructuralist textual models in order to understand the new forms of literature that were emerging, particularly hypertext fiction. Because the reader has a role in constructing the narrative, hypertext has been described as an example of Barthes's (1990 [1974]) "writerly" text; Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) concept of the "rhizome" text has been applied to the branching structure of hypertext; Derrida's (1979, 1981) theory of "deconstruction" has been used to conceptualize the multilinearity that hypertext permits (see Bolter 2001; Burnett 1993; Delany and Landow 1991; Landow 1994, 1997, 2006 for full accounts). Perhaps most famously, hypertext has been described as "an almost embarrassingly literal reification or actualization" (Delany and Landow 1991: 10) of contemporary literary theory. While poststructuralist models can be used to conceptualize the hypertext structure, the association of hypertextuality and these particular theoretical models has not necessarily led to literary-critical readings of individual digital fictions. Rather, the metaphoric mapping of theory and textuality has remained mostly at an abstract level—a blueprint from which few, if any, analyses have since materialized.

In what has proved to be a more influential approach, first-wave theorists situate hypertext fiction readers in a binary relationship with their print counterparts (e.g. Coover 1992; Douglas 1992; Liestol 1994; Simanowski 2002) and, as noted above, the role of the reader represents an important and distinguishing facet of digital fiction and its reception. In Douglas's (1992) article, "What Hypertexts Can Do That Print Narratives Cannot", the hypertext reader is compared to the print reader in terms of the choices that each medium allows. Whereas, "in print narratives", Douglas argues, "our reading experience begins with the first words of the narrative and is completed by the last words on the last page" (2), in hypertext fiction, "readers are unable to begin reading without . . . making decisions about the text—where their interests lie and which pathways through the text seem most likely to satisfy them" (2–3). Douglas's observations about the choice granted to the reader are based on examples from Storyspace hypertext fiction but could also apply to a range of other digital fiction including Web-based hypertext fiction, Flash fiction (fiction produced in Flash software), and videogames. For example, the Web-based hypertext fiction *Inanimate Alice* has a linear structure so that the reader is not granted any choice in terms of her reading path. However, she has to click links and play mini-games to move between different episodes so that nontrivial effort is still required to read the text. The reader of Jason Nelson's (2003) *Dreamaphage* must navigate a collection of floating texts within a 3D environment, using the cursor as a kind of steering wheel and deciding which of the documents he or she would like to explore first. From a methodological perspective, however, irrespective of the text type, Douglas's observations—though accurate—do not yield either a critical analysis or a means of conducting such an analysis for any type of digital text. This is somewhat ironic, as it is precisely because the reader has such an interactive role in digital fiction that transparent and replicable approaches are so necessary for the critical field that surrounds it. If a particular approach to a particular digital fiction is to be useful to a range of readers who all experience a different version of the narrative, then the method of analysis needs to be visibly and overtly articulated.

A MULTIFOCAL PERSPECTIVE

As Douglas notes above, digital fiction is different from print fiction because of the affordances that digital media permits, and, consequently, analyses of digital fiction must be sensitive to those differences. Primarily, reader-players of interactive narratives have to learn and "submit" (cf. Walker 2000: 48) to the mechanics of the text to read or play successfully. What is more important to a *literary* analyst, however, is the relationship between a digital text and the reader, and the way the text causes a certain (subversive as well as immersive) response. According to Hayles (2007), deep attention allows

subjects to focus on an artifact like a print novel for an extended period of time without, however, losing a sense of the actual world surrounding them. Hyper attention, on the other hand, is based on natural or artificial primary needs (such as food, drink, and sleep in actual life and the "artificial" basic need to finish a video game level or quest before being able to focus on any other activity) and occurs frequently with young people immersed in game worlds. It frequently results in the prioritization of virtual world over actual world needs or concerns and "is characterized by switching focus rapidly between different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom" (Hayles 2007: 187). As Rettberg (2009) observes, "[N]o literary medium [is] more suited to straddling the divide between hyper attention and deep attention than electronic literature", and writers of digital fiction have experimented with this divide in uniquely creative ways. To comprehend and critically reflect on the aesthetic interplay between hyper and deep attention, we need methods that can capture the way the text invites those kinds of attention. We need to look at the text, but we will also need to consider media-specific attributes such as interface design, software versus hardware mechanics, links, images, sound, and so on. Moreover, digital fiction becomes textualized (and/or tactile and audiovisual) for the reader in a way that print literature does not and cannot.

NARRATOLOGIES

The media specificity of digital fiction causes blind spots in some narratological frameworks because they are to a great extent developed based on readings of print literature. So, for example, while narratological models can be used to analyze the narrative structure of a hypertext fiction, categories as simple as "story" and "plot" are immediately problematized by hypertext fiction's multilinearity; they sometimes have multiple plots, multiple stories, multiple beginnings, and multiple endings (cf. Laccetti 2008). Ryan (2004) argues that "the question of how the intrinsic properties of the medium shape the form of narrative and affect narrative experience can no longer be ignored" (1). Given the diversity of narrative forms that we experience daily, ranging from exclusively oral to exclusively textual, Ryan's statement could (or perhaps should) be considered a truism. Yet while analysts are becoming increasingly more aware of media-specificity, few replicable approaches exist that can be used to analyze digital fiction as a form of *digital* narrative as opposed to a form of digital *narrative*. We caution the unmediated application of print-based frameworks. Instead, this volume offers a number of approaches that seek to outline and promote methodologies for the media-specific study of digital fiction. These methods may well prove to be useful for the analysis of other types of text and thus contribute to the development of a transmedial approach to narrative (cf. Ryan 2004), but

their primary purpose here is to address the idiosyncrasies brought with digital media in particular.

MULTIMODALITIES

Over the last fifteen years, new forms of digital fiction have emerged, seeking to explore, transcend, and deconstruct the default functions and uses of new digital technologies. As a result of the continuous development of digital fiction software has quickly followed. While early versions of Storyspace, for example, were limited in terms of its color and sound capabilities, the Web and its ensuing technological developments offer authors a wider variety of modes of representation. The development of multimedia and hypermedia software such as Flash, Dreamweaver, and Quicktime (as well as standalone applications such as recent versions of Storyspace) has led to a wave of digital fiction that combines verbal text with graphics, pictures, animations, and music in increasingly dexterous ways. Hayles (2002, 2008) defines this in terms of a shift between a first and second generation of digital fiction (cf. Ciccoricco 2007). While the first generation can be identified largely in terms of the link-lexia structure (cf. Landow 2006) as epitomized by early Storyspace fiction, the second generation of digital fiction has evolved with technology to contain more sophisticated and semiotically varied navigational interfaces.

Art and literature have always explored and transcended media borders, and the development of all forms of digital fiction can also be seen as both aesthetically and technologically motivated. For example, hypertext existed both as a phenomenon and as a concept long before the computer became a literary medium or commercialized, and a number of print works, retrospectively collected under the term "proto-hypertext," are often seen as the print precursors of hypertext fiction (e.g. Bolter 2001). B.S. Johnson's (1999 [1969]) *The Unfortunates* comprises a box containing twenty-seven pamphlets—each acting as an individual chapter. The reader must begin with the prescribed first and last pamphlet, but she or he can then choose to read the other chapters in any order. Also packaged in a box, Marc Saporta's (2011 [1963]) fragmented novel *Composition No. 1* is comprised of unbound pages that the reader can read in any order she or he chooses. In both cases, different reading orders deliver or imply different narrative outcomes so that the reader is assigned some responsibility, as in a hypertext, for selecting which path to follow. In this sense we might say that these early print literary hypertexts—or proto-hypertexts—demonstrated the need for a medium that was suitable for and adaptable to multilinear and multimodal storytelling. Likewise, the new generation of multimedia digital fiction has reacted to and developed alongside technological advancements. However, they can also be seen to remediate (cf. Bolter and Grusin 2000) the multimodal aesthetic strategies found in well-established