

Email novel

Jill Walker Rettberg

Author's final version as prepared for publication in Ryan, Marie-Laure, Lori Emerson and Benjamin Robertson (eds) *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.

Email novels present a narrative as a collection of emails written between characters in the story. Online email novels have been published both as a web archive of emails and as live performances where emails are sent directly to readers. There are also a number of print novels constructed as collections of emails.

Like *blogs and traditional epistolary novels, email novels are a serial form of narrative that makes use of the conventions of a familiar genre and expects the reader to piece together the context. The intimacy of email allows readers a sense of voyeurism that is often heightened by the emails being read in a simulation of a private inbox or arriving in the reader's own inbox but addressed to somebody else. The first email novel may be Carl Steadman's *Two Solitudes* (1994), where readers could subscribe to a series of emails between two people who fall in love and finally break up. Email novels that are performed live make use of the immediacy and speed of email. The timing of emails can also be key. For instance, emails in Rob Wittig's *Blue Company* (2001) were usually sent out more or less daily for a month, but one day, five emails arrived in rapid succession, giving "live" updates of a tournament in which the protagonist was involved. While the emails in *Blue Company* are all from the protagonist to the woman he is in love with, Scott Rettberg's *Kind of Blue* (2002) consists of emails between several characters. Here several emails are often sent on a day, and sometimes within a few minutes of each other as the plot develops. Both these works were first performed live to subscribers, and can now be read as web archives. Another technique is to publish the novel as a simulation of a fictional character's webmail, as in Mo Fanning's *PlaceTheirFace.com* (2007) or Richard Powers' "They Come in a Steady Stream Now" (2004), where the reader appears to have somehow gained access to the main character's private inbox. Some email novels attempt to retain the illusion of authenticity by giving an explanation for the reader's access to the emails. For instance, the foreword to Joseph Alan Wachs' series of iPhone apps *Treehouse: A Found E-Mail Love Affair* (2009) explains that the emails presented were found and painstakingly reconstructed when Wachs was restoring a corrupted hard drive.

Most email novels cast the reader as a voyeur looking in. An exception to this was *Online Caroline* (2001), which directly addresses the reader, making the recipient of the emails a character in the fiction. *Online Caroline* consisted of a web site with the video diary of Caroline, the protagonist, who eagerly befriended the reader. The reader answered questions and gave advice and in return, received daily, customized emails from Caroline. The story unfolded over twenty-one days in which the reader gradually discovered that Caroline was being held captive as a guinea pig in a bizarre experiment, and that the reader,

by keeping her company online, had in fact in some way been complicit in her abuse and possibly, finally, her death. (Walker 2003).

Email novels share many characteristics with SMS narratives, and with certain narratives told in social media such as Facebook or Twitter. Using the Facebook API, narratives such as XX have created customized stories using facts about the actual reader and their friends which can create a similar complicity to *Online Caroline*. More commonly, in both email novels and other social media narratives, the reader is left outside of the fiction, remaining a voyeur.

SEE ALSO: blogs; chatterbot; from book to screen; digital fiction; electronic literature; interactive narrative; immersion; narrativity; performance; preservation and archivization

Bevan, Rob, and Tim Wright. 2000. *Online Caroline*.
<http://www.onlinecaroline.com>

Fanning, Mo. 2007. *Place Their Face*. <http://placetheirface.com>

Powers, Richard. 2004. "They Come in a Steady Stream Now." *Ninth Letter*.
http://www.ninthletter.com/featured_artist/artist/5 [No longer available]

Rettberg, Scott. 2002. *Kind of Blue*.
<http://tracearchive.ntu.ac.uk/frame/index.cfm?article=77>

Steadman, Carl. 1994. "Two Solitudes". *InterText* 5(1).
<http://www.intertext.com/magazine/v5n1/solitudes.html>

Wachs, Joseph Alan. 2009. *Treehouse: A Found E-Mail Love Affair*. iPhone app.

Walker, Jill. 2004. "How I was Played by Online Caroline". In *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, edited by N. Wardrip-Fruin and P. Harrigan. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Wittig, Rob. 2001. *Blue Company*. <http://www.robwit.net/bluecompany2002/>