

The Flash Community Implications for Post-Conceptualism

by Donna Leishman

Complimenting a broader international research paradigm shift, Electronic Literature scholars and practitioners alike have expressed a desire to expand the field to include deep collaborations with other disciplines. In achieving such a goal any original indigenous ideologies and aesthetics may be challenged. This dialectical tension between striving to be niche/identifiable /original in a mixed discipline economy faced with contemporary descriptors of 'human experience' such as Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Antonelli's *Elasticity* (2008) or even Turkle's "life mix" (2011) remains key to facing this challenge.

Using new interviews, emergent theories and archival resources this paper argues that the Flash community has already faced the issue of contemporary homogeneity driven by our on-going context of rapid technological change, and can be regarded as an exemplar of post-conceptual experimentalism. After a comparative analysis between the Flash Community and Electronic Literature the paper goes on to explore other new insights and considers the implications of being post-conceptual as a future opportunity and/or risk for Electronic Literature.

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Summary

The Flash community was born digital from a predominantly commercial world-view opposed to electronic literature, which has arguably always straddled its conceptual tradition and its digitalism. Both communities investigated programming and used the Internet to help produce experimental creative outcomes. Chronistic differences become interesting around the millennium with Flash's focus on neo-geometric creative programming (Manovich) vs. the boom in multi-media experimentation within electronic literature (Amerika et al.)—both cultures seemingly reached into new territories and not without criticism^[1]. This paper will chart the formative moments within the Flash community up to present day and finally will present issues relevant to the electronic literature community.

A Word About Me

Since 1999 I have been working as an artist and researcher in experimental visual narrative and interaction (6amhooover.com), all of my interactive work has been produced using Flash. And as such, I have a particular personal perspective on the various historical, established and emergent features of this

community. As an artist I 'fall' in-between the communities of Flash, media art and electronic literature as a researcher I have focused on the larger issues of digital narrative and the aesthetics of interaction and immersion. This purposefully interstitial perspective has allowed me to experience some of the commonalities and differences between the communities firsthand.

Introduction | The Value of Community

Today's torrent of societal change fostered by a digitally networked reality creates a new circumstance whereby we "...routinely live at different scales, in different contexts, and at different settings—Default, Phone-only, Avatar On, Everything Off on a number of screens, each with its own size, interface, and resolution, and across several time zones." (Antonelli 15) This reality has effected many corporate identities (consider the state of journalism, publishing, music distribution, and retail) and deeply challenged the production and distribution market mechanisms. The speed and volume of change can no longer be termed a new or temporary circumstance (liquid modernity was proposed by Bauman back in 2000). Alongside this moving societal context a broader international research paradigm shift has occurred which sees Humanities seeking collaboration with the empirical sciences. electronic literature scholars and practitioners alike have expressed a desire to expand the field to include deep collaborations with other disciplines^[2]. In achieving such a goal the established ideologies and aesthetics may be eroded or even lost, the issue of identifying, establishing genre features and methods still remain an important activity in sustaining community identity and rigor especially in multidisciplinary methodologies.

Within this paper I will focus on defining the Flash Community's framework and its usefulness (or not) for electronic literature (e-lit) and for the sake of expediency leave defining the e-lit framework to the HERA funded *ELMCIP*^[3] project, a project that specifically explores how the e-lit communities have evolved in recent decades. This paper will also explore in detail the history of the Flash Community (FC) from the proposition that it is an important online community to review because of its particular born digital nature, its community evolution and lastly its cultural impact in terms of audience and economic value, both of which can arguably be regarded as second only to the massive multiplayer online role-playing sector.

Introduction | Flash

Since the arrival of the computer as creative tool with *Spacewar* in 1961 (Russel et al.) ever-expanding worlds of imaginative creators have adapted technologies to their own needs. In the early days of Internet culture these blooming communities centered very clearly on software technologies: *IRC*, *MUDS*, *ASCII*, *HTML*, *Flash* and *StorySpace*^[4], though conceptually, they communicated a multitude of different concerns.

Digital mediated communities also present a challenge to existing documentary and archival practices. The poetics of new media places emphasis on temporal (and in these cases) online interactions. Much of the material around the FC is inaccessible, almost invisible to those out with the community, and documentation of the development of the community is particularly scant, spread over various forums, blogs, website and punctuated by key gatherings and differing archival perspectives. Traces of the Flash culture from the turn of the century, predating a serious digital archival practice, now remain mostly in memory. The paper will discuss new research, primarily using interviews as a form of oral history (cf. Muller 2008) to better reveal the internal developments and events that helped to form and feed the FC.

Prehistoric History: The Mid Nineties

The notion of where to cite the origins of *any* digital community is contentious; does one define the beginning as the first use of a tool or the first public experience of new discrete practice or the emergence of a defined new philosophy or ideology? This paper takes the liberty of beginning with practitioners—John Maeda and Golan Levin (fig 1.) who are regarded by the FC itself as pioneers of creative programming with their artistic work using Java Applets in the mid nineties. John Maeda as founder of the M.I.T based *Aesthetics and Computation* Group is particularly interesting. His group was a prototype of the technology/art collective that we see emulated within the history of the FC. Maeda's group also gave life to the influential *Processing.org* library (2001), which has helped to make programming more accessible to electronic artists. Golan Levin, an alumnus of this group, went on to setup *Singlecell.org* (2001-2) another diverse online gathering of computational artists and designers who explored programming to visualize natural behaviors. Both Maeda and Levin now position themselves as critical practitioners of software art and span the fields of audio, visual, design and art research (Maeda).





Fig. 1. *Flong* by Golan Levin 2002, *Snowflake* generator Java Applet.

In 1996, whilst Levin and Maeda were exploring Java Applets, Macromedia Flash was introduced (Adobe took it over in 2005). As a multimedia technology it was initially developed to allow interactivity and animation to stream over limited 56k 'dial-up' Internet via its vector based (opposed to Bitmap) drawing and animation toolbox. As a secondary feature Flash contained its own simple programming language Actionscript. In this prehistoric period technical limitations were a major driver: Flash 3 (circa 1996) was a tool very much orientated to a timeline (not to programming), early users had to devise workarounds^[5] in the same way that the hyperlink was a forced constraint / limitation in early e-lit works^[6].

Stone Age: Y2K

Four years later, at the turn of the millennium the FC began to gain cultural momentum, and the community displayed early characteristics of today's liquid condition of routinely living and connecting with different contexts over multiple time zones. Most members were resolutely working within the Dotcom bubble as programmers and web-designers. From the outset (unlike e-lit) there were at least two distinct subgroups of people within the community, the *makers*^[7] and the contentious 'fan boys', a term, which we will visit in following sections and explore further. The Flash makers were made up of a broad, complex international group of "artists, developers, poets, geeks, punks and freaks" (Davis) who were initially connected both by the forum [Dreamless.org](http://dreamless.org), a community discussion board managed by Joshua Davis, one of the FC's most divisive and visible artist/designer/technologist hybrid characters. In terms of his community impact Davis was also a major exponent with his personal projects [Once-upon-a-forest.com](http://once-upon-a-forest.com) and [Praystation.com](http://praystation.com) both of which had significant audience interest. Davis's *Once-upon-a-forest* project at its zenith had a new iteration launched every week.

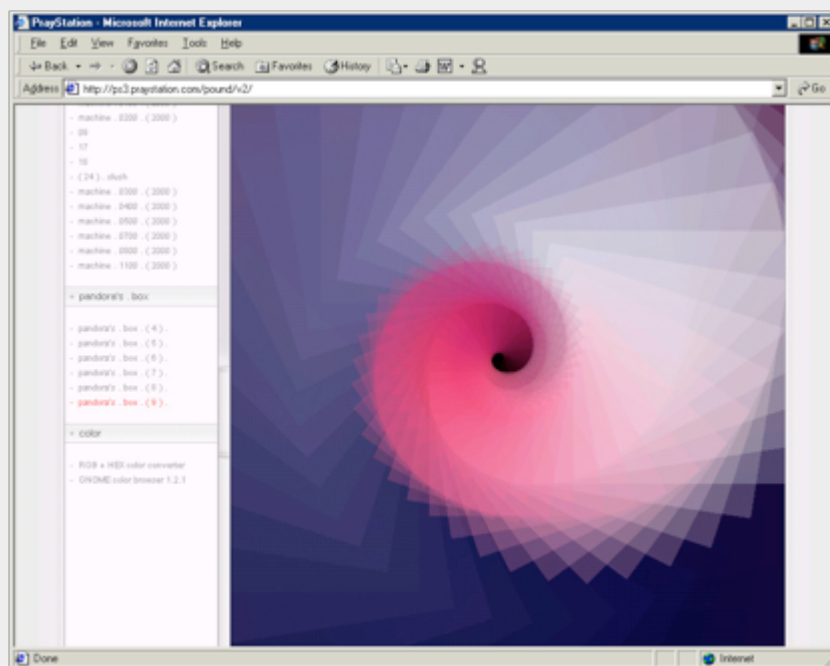


Fig. 2. *Praystation* by Joshua Davis ca. 2004.

The other ties that bound this new community were the need to express personal (i.e. non-client orientated) ideas free from the responsibilities of good usability. Davis described *Praystation* as being “. . . the nemesis of what we perceive the web to be. No easy, short domain name. No easy to use navigation. No instructions. No FAQs. No ads. No links. No technical support. No help. No answers. A digital black hole where a character I have created amuses himself to death. Where questions are provoked but never answered . . .” (Walters).

Similar to what was happening within e-lit, the networked connectivity of the Internet was instrumental in fostering a particular *state* of creative mind. For Flash it provided a simultaneously discursive and practical open sharing of ideas and code, participants in both communities were in principle free from geographic politics and/or the traditional logistics of production and distribution. Within the FC there was a very close direct communication centred mainly on each other's personal projects. Direct communication came in the form of daily conversations held using early forms of Internet chat such as ICQ and MSN messenger^[9], these long fractured and often multiple conversations were often ran simultaneously alongside the day job (cf. fig. 3 for an example of multi-tasking).

The creative potential and sense of freedom to develop projects (without the corporate client) was enticing, the fact that there were likeminded connectable (via the ICQ or private forums) peers was 'intoxicating' (Gifford). There was a friendly competition to 'do better'; remote networked creative remixing of works facilitated by the *Dreamless* forum were common.

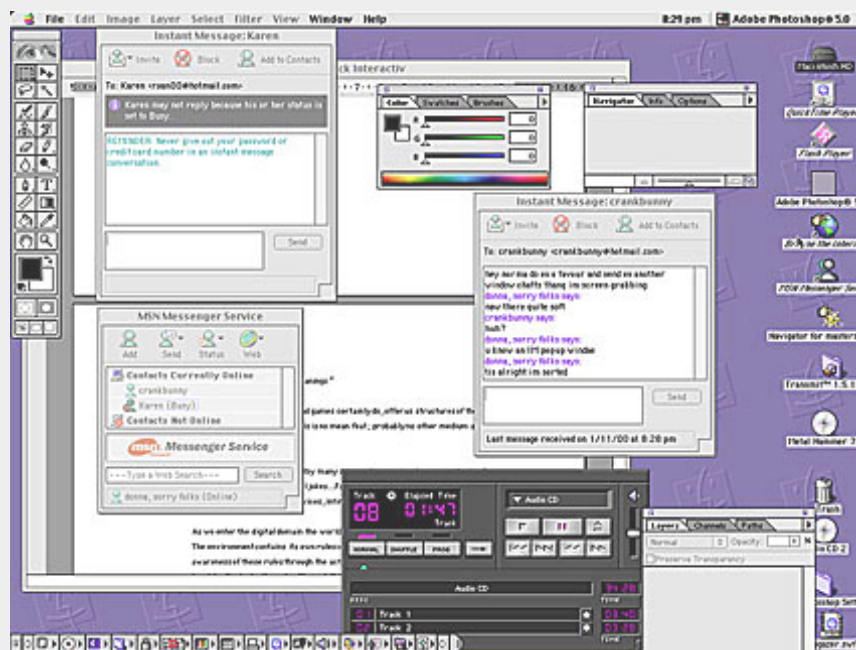


Fig. 3. My Apple Macintosh desk layout from September 1999, a typical multi- tasking environment.

This group quickly naturalized the internationalism of the Internet, with key committed community members being physically based in North America, Japan and Europe^[10], the participants list in *Singlecell.org* as an example of this spread (US / UK / NO / AT / FI). The Stone Age period of the FC, with this deep connection and work collaboration remotely could be regarded as a precursor to the connectivity of today's social media^[11].

The majority came to the FC from a programming / systems perspective rather than any creative design background, print designers were for the most part hands off in terms of the code. Implied in Davis's quote describing the *Dreamless* ethos is the democratization or freedom within the forum—the lack of formal design education did not hinder or block anyone. Another aspect to this community was the ability to upload work on the Internet without any conceivable sanction. Being free from any client direction, everyone you could make anything. For the FC community this represented a particular form for release given that most people were constrained by clients or their Art Directors. In addition the palpable swelling audience for these personal projects evidenced by community members adding each other to their link sections on websites, user hit counters, online zines and forums soon created a scenario in which the personal projects rather than the job could better satisfy or fulfil the ego.

Bronze Age: Commodity in the Flash Community

The community attracted or grew a hierarchy. An example of this is *K10K* (Kaliber10000) or *The Designer's Lunchbox*, a non-commercial proto design blog launched in 1998. Its unique selling point was that a new

issue came out every week and the content was updated hourly with global design news. Like *Dreamless* it was highly influential in sharing activity and news, unlike *Dreamless*, which was a more interior forum, *K10K* had very exterior facing style and trend orientated agenda. The founders Toke Nygaard and Michael Schmidt from the US design agency Cubancouncil.com had a particular editorial bent (aiming to inspire designers and 'design minded developers'). *K10K* was also divisive with some users claiming it was part of an emerging over design trend and that it was all but incestuous eye candy for the FC.

Around this period the three *New Masters of Flash* books were published by *Friends of Ed* (2001-3) and the *Flashforward* conferences were launched by Lynda Weinman and Stewart McBride. The first *Flashforward* was held in New York in 1999 and charged a very telling (corporate) entrance fee of \$995. The second *Flashforward* conference held in London in November 2000 (cf. fig. 4) was particularly seminal in that it brought physically^[12] together the international, non North American FC maker group. Alongside the main *Flashforward* London festival *NMUF.org* organized (via *Dreamless*) an underground event (cf. fig. 5), which called upon the *Flashforward* speakers to present for free. The result was an informal but maker led pre-conference. Attendee Jake Nickell who won the *NMUF* t-shirt design competition used his winnings (\$1000) as seed money to co-found *Threadless.org*, which is now a hugely successful crowd sourced t-shirt design community who have now sold more than 4 million tees since 2000.



Fig. 4. FlashForward 2000, London. The fee-paying audience. Courtesy of Phillip Kerman.



Fig. 5. The fan boys at the N.M.U.F 2000 London underground event.

One of the largest difference between e-lit and the FC is in the audience size. Almost from the outset the FC contained a layered community, the expert makers as experimenters and the 'fan boys' (vernacular definition being: a passionate fan of geek culture). These fan boys, many of who were employed in the peaking new media industry as programmers, can be regarded as additional drivers in propelling the community and as such are perhaps ill served by the somewhat derogatory term. It's a common fallacy that the makers were ideologically open source. Apart from Davis who copied and sold his *Praystation* hard drive^[13] most of the master makers did not actively share their code to community and or public. Rather there was a fast cycle of deconstruction and reverse engineering of the makers new experimental projects by these fan boys, for example Yugop's *Nervous Matrix* a 3x3 grid project (cf. fig. 6) was remade and shared within the week after it was launched by fans.

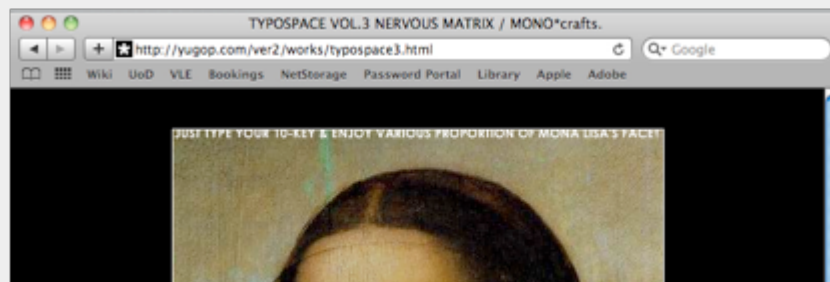




Fig. 6. *Nervous Matrix* by Yugop 2002, Actionscript.

These fan boys would be better described as graded line cooks to the maker as chef, a symbiotic not separate system. After all it was their work in stripping down and working out the code of the creative projects which propagated the high volume of code swapping and sharing within the levels of the FC, again predating the emergence of today's ubiquitous file swapping. This practice of reverse engineering had little if no deleterious effects—the appreciation of the makers craft enlarged from those novice Flash makers who were stimulated by meddling with the code inside inspirational projects. Like the *Threadless* t-shirt design community this activity unexpectedly started the formal FC tutorial / support websites^[14], which were for the most part both educational and free.

Iron Age: The Lightness of Flash

The FC's Iron Age occurs in the stormy period between the dotcom bubble popping around 2001 and the lull before the larger financial crisis of 2007. To recap the various systems of commoditisation had fell into place, the remote networked nature of the makers and fan boys had been given a physical structure via the numerous festivals and conferences and more mainstream cultural visibility was achieved via the various books in publication and international exhibitions.

With the release of *Flash MX* and *Actionscript 2.0* in 2004 the programming characteristic of the community really took hold, James Tindall, Jared Tarbell (cf. fig. 8), Geoff Stearns, Erik Natzke, Robert Hodgins, Lia and Joshua Davis were all major makers contributing to the programmatic aesthetic; the visual outcomes were categorized as a new form of 'neo-minimalism' by Manovich.

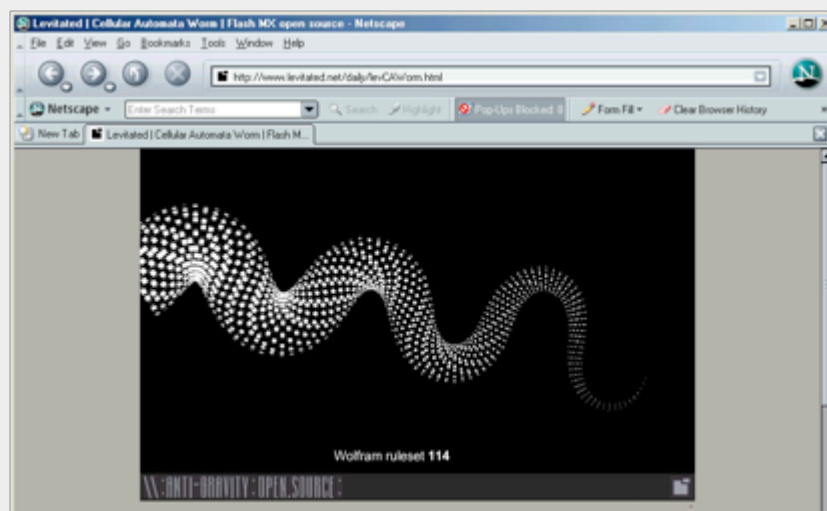


Fig. 7. *C.A. Worm* by Levitated / Jared Tarbell. 2004. Actionscript 2.0.

Predating this and almost entirely rejected by the FC was the aesthetics of the technology. The aesthetics of the technology was typically a preoccupation with the mechanical digital, cyborg and the post-human, a prosaic use of circuit boards (as a metaphor of connectivity and all things computerized) and the appropriation of the syntax of programming. Its usage was common with general Internet cultures and within e-lit^[15]. Manovich's essay *Generation Flash, Postscript: On The Lightness of Flash*, highlighted the emergence of this new visual and filmic aesthetic within FC. Manovich eclectically cites 1960's minimalist

sculptures and ambient electronica as referents. I would also argue that more recent design trends such as the Swiss Style of graphic design or the European (Danish) design influence of K10K were also formative as they were directly part of the real-time visual FC world. Manovich in his postscript also suggests that this aesthetic was an intentional cleansing of postmodernism, a move towards a rational science frame to escape the previous visual clichés and theories of postmodernism. As mentioned earlier the contextual or intellectual basis of the FC is incredibly hard to evidence between the lack of published critical discussion and is perhaps part evidenced by Golan Levin's statement: "I don't really give much consideration to categories like 'art', 'design', 'performance', 'science'. These boxes may be helpful for making sense of the past, but not necessarily for anticipating the future". The FC for the most part seemed post-conceptual, where makers were by their own free will removed from a socio-political context.

The Emergence of (Anti) Ideologies: 2005

Considering the spans of other cultural histories, over a microscopic nine years (1996-2005) the FC had arguably now defined itself as a technological rather than content driven practice, a convergence opposed to electronic literature's (problematic for some) multi-media divergence in the same period. The FC's creative freedom or cultural value peaked when new personal projects were sponsored by brands attempting to co-associate (e.g. fashion label *Diesel* had a new media gallery and *Sony* developed *TheThirdplace.com*, indie UK publishing house Canongate commissioned *AptStudio.com* to produce a series^[16] of new media promos). The allegation that the FC was all style, no substance and without content wasn't entirely untrue but what is implied is that is a bad thing. What was also clear was that the FC seems to be without the traditional cultural grounding. At the time I found it intriguing that famous personas from the print-based Design world or mainstream culture were held in lower esteem by this group. At the first *Flashforward* conference in NYC (FF2K), when Run DMC were hired to perform at the conference after party, the audience were a mix of the nonchalant and bemused. A similar response was given to David Carson (cited as the most influential graphic designer of the nineties) who keynoted for Flash In the Can, the Canadian version of *Flashforward* in 2005, Carson was left standing alone at the after party. I initially thought it evidence of the FC's bravado or the FC's extremely insular worldview, but now suspect it was another indicator of the born digital absenteeism in terms of popular design culture, whereas the e-lit community is normally contextually aware of their literary / poetic precedents and as such can often display (within their works) a sophisticated self-reflexive mode of inquiry.

I have always felt that all Internet-sustained communities were defined by their lack of stable descriptors and that genre agility was native. The sustained deep commitment to the programming and technical aspect of Flash seems like an early creative process of entwining. Lucy Suchman, an anthropologist specializing in the digital, recently described the

"... relations of human practice and technical artifact [have] become ever more layered and intertwined. At the same time that the technological project is one of congealing and objectifying human activities; it is increasingly also one of animating and finding subjectivity in technical artifacts. The assimilation of lived experience to technique goes both ways, which only makes the project of re-imagining technological objects the more urgent."

The allegation that the FC was problematically without content was perhaps immature: looking retrospectively the impact of the formal interest in the experimentation for its own end has led to an economic trail^[17].

Intersections: Narrative and Generative Art

Generalisations are never useful and particularly so in Internet communities where there are rarely any constitutive and regulative rules. As two committed networked communities FC and e-lit have inevitably intersected over the decades, some of the FC members have worked with narrative^[18] and similarly generative representation (opposed to link based structures) have been explored by authors within e-lit.

Flash and Narrative

As far back as the first *Flashforward* conference in 1999 Josh Ulm from *loresearch* explicitly considered and spoke about the implications of digital media for narrative:

"Storytelling is fundamental to society, culture, and communication. Narrative is the basic structure by which we share our ideas and experiences. As we begin to use the Internet to tell stories, the narratives we communicate will have the benefit of interactivity, programmatic behaviours, non-linearity, and physidigital space and multi-user environments—aspects that traditional media has (sic) never truly understood."

Josh Ulm was also the curator of *The Remedi Project* (1997-2002), an online portal that had twelve online exhibitions based on experimental work from over 60 digital artists from around the world; many of these works were narratives, representational and deeply considered their networked nature and as such were quite counter to the Manovich's *Unbearable Lightness of FLASH*. *Born Magazine* (BornMag1997-) founded

by Gabe Kean of Secondstory.com is another long established hub, that still specializes in partnering interactive artists from the Flash and Net Art communities with poets or writers (cf. fig. 9). New collaborative projects are launched on BornMag every three months.

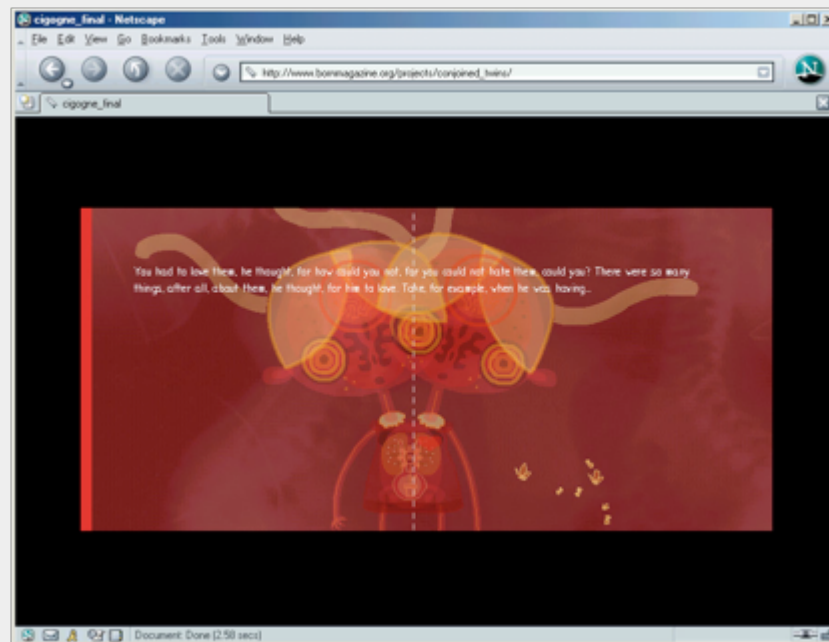


Fig. 9. *C is for Conjoined Twins* by Susannah Breslin and Rolito from Rolitoland.com 2004.

Another FC narrative producer is the UK design agency *Hi-Res!.net* and their alter ego SoulBath.org (cf. fig. 10). *Hi-Res!.* carved a very particular niche that was both client-led and conceptually experimental. Their work is a complex hybrid of film, motion-graphics, novel, game play and design. This is exemplified in their early 'cross media' interpretation of Darren Aronofsky's film *Requiem for a Dream*.

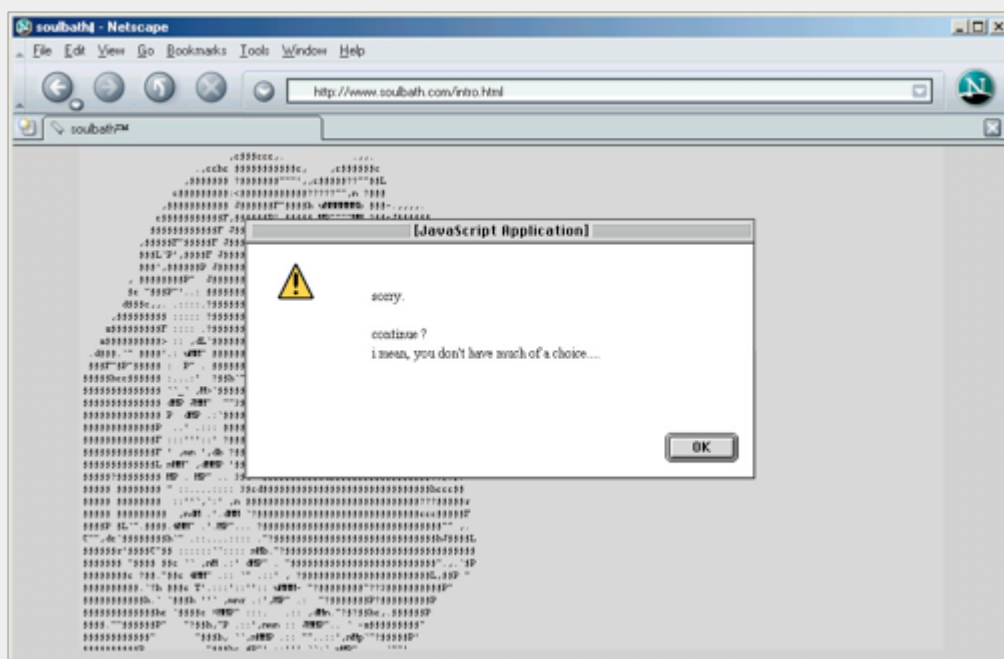


Fig. 10. *Soulbath* by Hires! 2000.

E-Lit and Generative Processes

Just as the FC has narrative moments, generative and database processes have also been used in e-lit works. Biggs (*Babel* 2001), Wardrip-Fruin et al. (*Talking Cure* 2002), Morrissey (*The Last Performance.org*, 2007-10), Cho (*Wordscapes* 2008) and Torres (*Poemas no meio do caminho* 2009) can all be seen to represent a deep authorial investigation into Processing, database programming, and visualization algorithms as methods to extend the scope of the reader's interactions. This said, difference still remains

—Morrissey's, Cho's, and Torres's projects use language and interaction semantically, i.e. it as allied to a conceptual purpose, whereas the FC can be regarded as a form of continuous examination of function (cf. Yugop's *Amaztype Zeitgeist*). These moments of intersection can be regarded as a digital blur (Rodgers), an overlap of interests happening ostensibly at the fringes or niches within each community. When the FC were exploring the programming capacities of ActionScript (1996-2006), e-lit were deep in their consideration of the hyperlinked structure, cybertexts, and the debates of differentiation between Ludology and Net Art. E-lit became absorbed in complex computing later than both the Flash and media art communities (Biggs and Wardrip-Fruin are exceptions), and it could be argued that the very conceptual tradition of e-lit makes any significant cultural or technological change likely to have creative impact or at least be of interest to the community. Simply put perhaps e-lit given its focus on conceptual practice cannot escape the near histories of its community neighbors?

The Present | The Right to Children

Having considered the key historical movements, tensions and the various sub communities or hubs that orbited around the larger entity that is the FC (*Dreamless*, *Singlecell*, *The Remedi Project*, *BornMag*, *K10K*, *Flashkit* et al.) this paper will now consider the present. Five years ago, the risk was that Flash would disappear. Marcomedia and the current owners Adobe have worked very hard at making the Flash player and Actionscript 2.0/3.0 (2006) indispensable, they were proactive and consulted with key members of the FC to build in 'desirable' release features. Flash has had significant success with streaming video, so much so it is now the default viewing player for *YouTube* with its 3,000,000,000 views per day, and it poised to make major in-roads into becoming a 3-D player and extending its reach into the online gaming market (Gifford). From its origins as a vector based animation tool, it has become a robust programming option and video player. However the FC today has been media homogenized, reviewing the current large audiences at Flash conferences such as *FITC* and *Flash on the Beach*, these conferences now cover a plethora of digital production fields: motion and video graphics, gaming, mobile technologies, HTML5, film as well as Flash. Many of the original makers, such as Robert Hodgkin, Casey Reas, Mr Doobs and Hoss Gifford. are now exploring *Processing* (Java) and *openFrameworks* (C++) and have moved almost entirely away from Flash as a tool, so the name Flash as a description of this community (if we follow the people) no longer seems appropriate. If the tool defines the FC then the community has extended its borders to such an extent that it now encompasses all the major digital production spheres (sound perhaps being the only exception at the moment). Mapping the initial maker group^[21] and looking for any migration it is clear that the majority have remained in their initial dualism between doing both corporate and personal projects - with many founding their own digital media agencies and companies. This sustained ability for the FC to generate new companies, or the makers to be placed at the helm of major digital agencies^[22] is distinctive.

This paper has only sketched (in the broadest lines) the history of the FC, but even such a sketch contains interesting anomalies, features and points of interest for e-lit. What leaps out is that the FC was heavily populated by unconventional creatives who were neither educated formally nor aware/concerned with the broader socio-political conceptual landscape. E-lit makers are typically academically orientated (theory, comparative studies, poetics) and often are educated (at least) at graduate level. The correlation of e-lit authors either as alumni or appointed faculty of universities (Brown, Bergen, De Montfort, M.I.T, Carnegie Mellon et al.) is I suggest a defining characteristic in itself for e-lit^[23] as is the corporate nature for the FC. The FC's first decade was dominated by extremely committed individuals who put in thousands of hours of work into their personal projects and without (for the most part) any material support whilst maintaining client web work. Some of the expert makers such as Robert Hodgkin or Yugop even recycled their experiments back into client designs and vice versa for *Hi-Res!* whose experimental alter ego *Soulbath.org* website won them the attention of the director Aronofsky. E-lit has yet to significantly^[24] cross-pollinate personal practice with the commercial sector. The FC's audience draw being both an industrial and experimental community was interestingly large, even the homogenised contemporary Flash conference circuit still generates 500-1000 paying attendees a time whereas e-lit remain relatively niche. The integration or involvement of the corporate sector within the FC is also particular, very few FC members have evolved like Daniel Brown (*noodlebox.com*) into media art as a full-time vocation, most continue to straddle and manage personal and work responsibilities. The experimentation and community-sharing ethos that was fostered by Flash triggered for many makers and fan boys a deep commitment with creative technologies, the fruits of which have proven to be very impactful via the entrepreneurial and leadership qualities of the makers.

Questions

Was Flash helped by its own post-conceptual default? Were the outcomes more inviting for audiences, as often no prior knowledge of any kind was needed to experience these artefacts? Where the delight and pleasure was in the moment, a new abstract experience (an insight into the code would be a bonus but not a deal breaking in terms of engagement). The FC should be viewed under the light of science paradigm, perhaps via digital humanities, but not through the lens of traditional humanities, for many FC members Levin's comment about a fundamental disinterest in categorisation highlights that the FC were fully adjusted to the life of liquidity where fractured timelines were normal, where social structures were no longer stable, and a state of being where fixed concepts like 'career' could no longer be meaningfully applied, what was

valued was progress, the FC evidenced a continuous examination of configuration and function. Fifteen years of digital convergence and movement of knowledge and expertise has made the makers and fan boys well placed for the unknown future. This could be the most valuable community output as Boulton (2010) posits a future where we may no longer have websites^[25], where discrete portals built around brands will no longer hold any value, his prediction is also mirrored by the growing interest in combining mobile devices and 'cloud computing' (virtual servers on the Internet) as a way to even more dynamically scale and deliver content.

The structured creativity of the FC seemed like an important driver in generating innovation (Hogkin and Cinder (16)). Without the pressure of the client work what would have happened? As a place for collaboration FC is a strong yet nimble set of working practises made the FC a light community indeed. The conceptual nature of e-lit makers places the e-lit community at the other end of that spectrum. The frequency of the commitment within the FC a community was also important with many new iterations of significant work being uploaded weekly (*Praystation*, *Once-upon-a-forest*) or monthly (*BornMag*, *The Remedi Project*, *Singlecell*). This impetus to constantly re-invent and or create, especially in a reality where things move precariously fast and time is precious is a way to circumvent stagnation, or member disconnection. One thing seems constant: the worlds of imaginative creators are (still) expanding, and adapting technologies to their own needs. So perhaps naturally the FC are no longer staying put with their technology and are migrating onwards into C++ and WebGL (an extension of JavaScript).

Toke Nygaard talking to the *Digital Archaeology*^[25] project in 2010 about *K10K* reinforces the Levin mindset regarding fixed knowledge:

" . . . a lot of experiments, a lot of hard work brought us to where we are right now, I feel like the whole time, back then (1998) and I still feel like that, that there was a sense that, ya we made its, like this is IT, this is the Internet, I feel like that is a completely weird way to see it, I constantly feel like we are just started, even now I feel like . . . [pause] people who just sit back with their SEO^[26] knowledge and their nonsense . . . it like we just started, tomorrow what your doing right now is totally obsolete. . . . "

Conclusion

Macromedia/Adobe's Flash was more than just a piece of production software. Like e-lit, it fostered an international community complete with indigenous ideologies, tension points, and aesthetics. The FC was ultimately less about a shared platform and more about a set of creative concerns: an agile passion for creative programming, a place to be conceptually 'light', a community as laboratory with two entrance/exit doors (personal and corporate). It was for many the fertile beginning of obsessive relationship with creative computing, and deep networked connection with other makers across the world, but now a tentative fifteen years after its launch the defining makers have migrated away from Flash and the defining minimal aesthetic and characteristics have been all but consumed by the digital deluge, the name Flash community now means something else, far less tangible. *HiRes!*'s founder Jugovic also makes mention of the digital ages threat of oblivion and notes that everyones methods are challenged to keep pace. In this sense the FC could also be considered as an omen, a possible example of the dangers (or strength depending on ones position) in fully embracing movement and platform multiplicity.

The future looks interesting for digitally mediated networked narrative; a rise in Augmented Reality Games such as Trent Reznor's *Year Zero* (2007) and Tim Kring's *Conspiracy For Good* (2010) are significantly invested pre-produced narrative experiences knowingly blending the reality / fiction game and narrative boundaries. The Google Chrome Experiments are exploring innovative real-time graphical formats for the Chrome browser via WebGL. Their award winning interactive music videos, *The Wilderness Downtown* and the *Three Dreams of Black* are distinctly narrative and transmedia (Jenkins).

Authoring or directing creative innovation in the future seem to be about bringing together industries and stitching together niches/communities with definable quality or qualities as a way counter the risk of blandness or erasure in the deluge. Integrated digital campaigns across media spheres require discrete genres to leap and link between the different context ontologies. The big question perhaps is are e-lit makers providers of a quality niche or will they offer meta/transmedia authorial skills required to devise and produced the next new round of innovative immersive experience?

Notes

[1] FC criticism: "The rules are: no Flash, no introduction pages, no more art for the sake of error, images must be unique to the site-maker, technology and the Internet are not subjects, and the work stands alone" (Salvaggio).

[2] A hot topic at the Electronic Literature Organization, *Visionary Landscapes* conference, Washington State University Vancouver in 2008.

[3] *Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice* is a 3-year collaborative research project running from 2010-2013, funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area

(HERA) JRP for Creativity and Innovation.

[4] Selection of technologies:

- *IRC* (Internet Relay Chat)
- *MUDS* (Multi-User Dungeon, with later variants Multi-User Dimension and Multi-User Domain)
- *ASCII* (American Standard Code for Information Interchange)
- *HTML* (HyperText Markup Language)
- Macromedia *Flash*
- *StorySpace* (A hypertext writing environment from Eastgate.com).

[5] An example of this would be using a laborious timeline frame workaround in score counting for games, i.e. go frame 1, 2, 3, 4 because Actionscript could not support variables via building a function.

[6] Making a virtue out of a limitation: the experimentation and investigation of Nelson's (1965) hyper-ness as the non-linear organization of content, and the implication of interconnectedness has consumed conceptually many electronic literature practitioners (see Stuart Moulthrop and *Eastgate.com*). The "hyperlink" was thrown into contrast by the emergence of Cybertext and the notion of ergodic literature by Aarseth (1997).

[7] I'm intentionally using a term 'maker' as it is a term well associated with craft, this captures the intense primary connection with the (digital) material as method to generate concept.

[9] Hoss Gifford (2011) a Scottish maker and cited *Master of Flash*, connected with the European team from NMUF.org in London's Flashforward and continued working with them via ICQ.

[10] Key committed community members being physically based in North America (natzke.com, weworkforthem.com, prate.com), Japan (yugop.com) and Belgium/France (chman.com, banja.com, rolitoland.com, vectorlounge.net)

[11] "[Facebook] keeps users in a neurotic limbo, not knowing whether they should hang on in there just in case they miss out on something good" (Charles).

[12] James Paterson met his long-term collaborator Amit Pitaru at the conference—only to discover that they lived in the same Brooklyn Street (Gifford).

[13] Eastgate Systems also sold Praystation's limited edition Hard-disk (2002), <http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/Praystation.html>

[14] Examples of the educational tutorial sub-community: actionscrip.org, flashkit.com, kirupa.com, moock.org/webdesign/flash/ predating the uploading of tutorial videos on YouTube.

[15] Examples of aesthetics of the technology: Amerika, Mark, *Film Text 2.0*, cf. markamerika.com/filmtxt and Mez (Mary-Anne Breeze), *_the data[/h!]/bleeding texts_*, cf. <http://www.netwurkerz.de/mez/datableed/comple/index.htm>

[16] Yann Martell's *Life of Pi*, and Douglas Coupland's *Hey, Nostradamus* and *The Bagdad Blogger* were all re-imagined as interactive screen artworks by Apt Studio, cf. <http://aptstudio.com/portfolio/>

[17] Evidence of Flash's economic trail can be traced through multiple threads, the revenue from the conferences, the publishing industry (Snow Dowd's *Macromedia Flash Bible* and the *New Masters of Flash* series), the start up companies: Hogkin's Cinder app, Internet host Mediatemple and the involvement of FC makers in big digital businesses such as Jared Tarbell/*Etsy*, Nickells/*Threadless* and the Jeff Stearn in *Youtube*. Veronique Brossier for *Cartoon Network*.

[18] Also working in narrative opposed to pure neo-minimalism for Flash there was Robert Hodgins (flight404.com/version4/), Motomichi Nakamura (motomichi.com, grime.com), Niko Stumpo (abnormalbehaviorchild.com), Nathan Jurevicius (scarygirl.com) and Matt Owens from the *Codexseries*.

[19] *The CodexSeries* 1-3 were curated and maintained by Matt Owens (VolumeOne.com). The website and associated CD-ROMs are a collection of digital works addressing in individual terms an exploration into narrative design. Cf. http://www.shift.jp.org/en/archives/1998/12/the_codexseries.html

[20] *BornMag's* creatives circa 2002-4: Erik Natzke (natzke.com) Michael Cina (<http://www.weworkforthem.com>) James Paterson (presstube.com), NosePilot (nosepilot.com) ChoppingBlock (choppingblock.com), Motomichi Nakamura (motomichi.com), Niko Stumpo (abnormalbehaviorchild.com) Nathan Jurevicius (nathanj.com.au), Matt Owens (volumeone.com) MilkyElephant (milkyelephant.com), Hillman Curtis (hillmancurtis.com)

[21] Notable Maker migrations between 2000-5 to 2011:

- John Maeda, then MIT media lab, now Academic (was principle of RMIT)
- Daniel Brown, then working for *Showstudio* now freelance consultant and artist.
- Natzke, then designer at forum, now working for Method and freelance.
- Prate, freelance designer / art director, now has her company *SansNom*.
- Mike Cina, then founder of *Wework for them*, now own company *Cinaart*
- Jared Tarbell, then freelance developer now Partner in *Etsy*
- James Paterson, then *Insertsilence*, now technical Director in an agency.
- Joshua Davis, then freelance *Praystation*, now Academic at Pratt and freelance artist
- Marcos Wescamp then, *Razorfish* now owner *Flipboard* iPhone App
- Gmunk, then Freelance designer, now Motion graphics – recent *Tron* remake.
- Hillman Curtis, freelance designer, now filmmaker.

[22] Jared Tarbell with *Etsy*, Robert Hodgins was a co-owner of the *Barbarian* group and designed *Cinder* a peer-reviewed, free, open source C++ library for creative coding

[23] One could argue that academia is a similar model for e-lit with the cycle of learning and reuse coming from academic research, which is taken back into teaching and some new practice.

[24] The publisher Penguin's collaborative writing experiment *A Million Penguins* with De Montfort University in 2007 a notable exception).

[25] The *Digital Archaeology* (2010) project curator Jim Boulton speculates that website will no longer exist in 5 years time, <http://www.storyworldwide.com/digital-archaeology/>

[26] SEO: Search Engine Optimization, a key method in networked online marketing companies.

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