

Old Wine in New Bottles

Platform 2 is a new column on the subject of electronic literature: works of poetry, fiction, and other literary forms made specifically for the capabilities and contexts of the contemporary networked computer. This is a field of practice that has been active for more than thirty years, but which has become particularly active in the years since the development and widespread use of the World Wide Web.

Perhaps the best way to think about the distinction between print literature and electronic literature is not to focus on these artifacts from a purely technological perspective, but rather from a cultural perspective. The focus of electronic literature is not on the new ways that books can be distributed electronically, for example as PDFs or e-books for the Kindle and similar devices, but rather on the new forms of literary experiences that are made available by the computer and the network: forms like hypertext fiction, interactive fiction, kinetic poetry, interactive literary installations, and a myriad of other new genres that are particular to the technologies and contexts of contemporary digital culture. In some ways electronic literature is an anticipatory phenomenon: its authors work in the expectation that as multimedia network-based communication has become commonplace, our expectations of literary experience are changing, and our relationship to text and literacy is changing. As the culture changes, so do the forms of literary experience that reflect that culture.

Electronic literature is not about simply repackaging books in new electronic wrappers, but conducting experiments in the future of reading; experiments that are often in conversation with those of the 20th century avant-garde. Many works that described as electronic literature have very little direct relation to print literary genres, but some reference, adapt, and re-interpret existing works from the literary tradition, in a number of compelling and surprising ways.

Shelley Jackson's 1995 hypertext fiction *Patchwork Girl* is a classic example of a work of electronic literature that adopts and subverts a work of print literature. *Patchwork Girl* is a play on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as well as on Frank L. Baum's *Patchwork Girl of Oz*, in non-linear hypertext form. In Jackson's version, we follow a female monster cobbled together from parts of women stolen from a graveyard. Each part of the new monster retains some aspects of the personality of the woman it was stolen from, and the monster's identity is more a pastiche, a choral assembly of personalities, than a singular character. In Jackson's multimedia rendering, the monster seeks out and has an affair with her creator, not Dr. Frankenstein, but Mary Shelley herself. The hypertext fiction is not only a brilliant feminist take on a classic novel, but also a witty postmodern metafiction about writing and identity in the contemporary era.

The online interpretation of Homer's classic *The Iliad*, transformed for computer multimedia by Barry Smylie, Jeff Wietor, Susan Katz, and Ryan Douglas is an excellent example of an attempt to take a classic work of literature and adapt to the particular affordances of the contemporary computer. Produced from 1999-2007, this work not only

produces a contemporary interpretation of the classic, but also tracks some of the new media shifts that occurred from the late 1990s to the present. The multimedia work allows the reader to switch between the text of Samuel Butler's translation of *The Iliad* and contemporary multimedia interpretations of several sorts. For the first nine books of *The Iliad*, this translation takes the form of illustrations, collages produced in Photoshop, which mix classical imagery, such as statuary and Grecian urns, with more contemporary imagery. The battles between the Greeks and Trojans in this version include imagery from professional wrestling shows, advertisements, and American football contests. Helen is represented with imagery reminiscent of soap operas or soft-core pornography.

As they move through the project and through the later books of *The Iliad*, Smylie and his collaborators use multimedia in more complicated ways. Portions of the Iliad are retold as an online radio play, and short animated movies, even as mock video games, in which the player can throw spears or shoot arrows. The outcome of any of these games is however predetermined, to fit with the exact details of the epic. The reinterpretation of *The Iliad* is an excellent experiment, both in attempting to bridge the language of epic with contemporary media vernaculars, and in its playful engagement with some of the many different media modalities available to authors creating work for the computer.

Chris Ault's "Hot Air" performs a more oblique form of transformation and reinterpretation of a literary work. The piece re-imagines this passage of Jeanette Winterson's 1989 novel *Sexing the Cherry*. The narrator describes an imaginary London in which the skies have been polluted with language:

The people who throng the streets shout at each other, their voices rising from the mass of heads and floating upwards towards the church spires and the great copper bells that clang the end of the day. Their words, rising up, form a thick cloud over the city, which every so often must be thoroughly cleansed of too much language. Men and women in balloons fly up from the main square and, armed with mops and scrubbing brushes, do battle with the canopy of words trapped under the sun.
(Winterson 11)

The piece makes use of "Web 2.0" information feeds, pulling in the current day's most popular search terms, which form a road, and the most recent tags from popular web sites including The Huffington Post, Perez Hilton, Engadget and YouTube, which form buildings across the horizon. So every time the piece loads, it builds a new concrete poem from Internet "idle talk." Reader comments from each site rise from the buildings and float overhead while a cleaner, floating about in a balloon, struggles in vain to clear the sky of the proliferating comments. The piece loads in new comments and tags every five minutes, tracking the comments on each site in real time, and the language pollution continues ceaselessly until the reader closes the browser window.

While obviously providing a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the state of everyday Internet discourse, "Hot Air," also provides us with an example of some of the complications and affordances of reading networked writing as literature. On the one hand, the author of the work did not himself write any of the words that appear on the screen at any given time. He conceptualized the program, visually interpreted Winterson's passage, and mapped her

description onto a prevalent form of contemporary Internet discourse. The actual text of the piece is written collectively by multiple and anonymous human and machine actors. In a sense, the actual writing of the piece is done by the Internet writ large more than by any individual person. Yet Ault clearly has vested the piece some intention, you might even say that there is a kind of authorial "voice" in the nature of his commentary. And while the words that appear on the screen appear there automatically, they provide an intriguingly up-to-the-minute portrait of the popular zeitgeist, a one-page moving snapshot of what many people happen to be thinking about right now. The end result is neither a story nor a poem, nor something that could simply be described as an image. It is rather a piece of network writing, a type of electronic literature that would not be possible without the particular technological affordances of the networked computer.

Shelley Jackson, *Patchwork Girl*. Eastgate Systems, Watertown, MA, 1995.
<http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/PatchworkGirl.html>

Barry Smylie et al., *Homer's Iliad*, 1999-2007.
<http://www.barrysmylie.com/iliad/iliad000.htm>

Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*. Vintage, London, 1989.

Chris Ault, "Hot Air," 2008. *Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures* 5 (Summer 2008)
<http://www.hyperrhiz.net/issue05/ault/index.html>