

Hans K. Rustad:

Scandinavian electronic literature and communities

This paper gives a survey of the tradition of electronic literature in Scandinavia, focusing both on the literature and the communities emerging on the field the last decade. In general the term “Scandinavian electronic literature” would denote electronic literature from Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Færøylene and Norway. Unfortunately electronic literature from Iceland and Færøylene are in my knowledge absent. The following paper will consequently include electronic literature and communities from Sweden, Denmark and Norway. The works that I will pay attention to are of different reasons to be valued as crucial, among others because of their historical significance of how electronic literature in Scandinavia has evolved, and because of the works quality.

“gimmicry” or “artistry”?

We have roughly 100 Scandinavian works. And I am afraid that some of these might be called “medial experimentation”, more than literary and conceptual experimentation. In that case we might end up with what David Ciccoricco (2007:3) reminds us of in *Reading network fiction*. He refers to John Barth which in the late 60s, in the essay “The literature of exhaustion” (1967) reflects on the materiality of literature and discusses a division between literature categorised as “gimmicry” and as “artistry”. Ciccoricco points out that it is likely that John Barth would regard much of the electronic literature as “intermedia happenings” because some of these have a tendency to lack “expertise and artistry”. In light of Barth’s notion, much of the literary experimentation in new media in Scandinavia might fall under the category of “gimmicks”. This is by the way an observation also done by the Norwegian artist Marte Aas, the creator of the work *Hva sier trærne?* (*What are the trees saying?*). She explained in an interview that I made with her that one of the things that she wanted to achieve with *Hva sier trærne?* was a work that gave an aesthetic experience, a sens-ational experience, and not a work that was considered and received as media experimentation, experimentation with new media’s affordances.

The tradition of electronic literature in the Nordic countries is more or less as old as the international tradition. If we regard Michael Joyce’s *afternoon* as a starting point in an international perspective, the birth of Nordic electronic literature equally took place in the late

1980s. But while international electronic literature of obvious reason is well covered by critical works, there has been little critical writing and attention on Nordic literature. Some publicity has been given to the literature, but this is limited to blogs, a few articles and some debates in news papers. One example of this is the Swedish journal of literary science, *Tidsskrift för litteraturvetenskap*, has devoted two issues to the relation of literature and new media, one issue in 1999 and another in 2009. But unfortunately neither of these issues draws in particular the attention toward electronic literature in Scandinavia or the Nordic countries.

Still, last decade there have been several initiatives concerning production, publishing, distribution, and archiving of electronic literature and art. Most of these initiatives have grown out of individual engagements and non-profit associations, such as the Nordic electronic literature organisation, *Elinor*, the Danish publisher and net site *Afsnit P*, *Betalab* in Sweden, and the Finish *Nokturno*. Some work has also been accomplished by established institutions such as NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting) and PNEK's (Production Network for Electronic Art) which had a collaborative project on *Digitale fortellinger (Digital narratives)*, and similar projects has also been running at DR (Danish Radio).

Afsnitp.dk is a net site on according to them self "literature outside the book" and was established in 1999 by Christian Yde Frostholm, Karen Wagner and Charlotte Hansen. Its main function is to write about digital literature and art work, at the same time that the net site is a gallery and a place for exhibitions. But as the net site has existed for 11 years, it also is a valuable archive for a lot of digital stuff that has been produced the last decay in and outside of Scandinavia.

Elinor (Electronic literature in the Nordic countries) is a network and a non-profit organisation that was established in 2005 by Jill Walker Rettberg, in collaboration with researchers on electronic literature from Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway.¹ Except the first year, when it received founding from the *Arts Council* in Norway and *Nordic Literature and Library committee*, it has been a non-financial, non-budget project. The lack of financial support has lead to low activity the last few years.

¹ Jill Walker was the head of the project, and shared the initiative with Lisbeth Klastrup, Susana Tosca, Raine Koskimaa, Patrick Svensson, Søren Pold and Thomas Breivik. Texts for the presentation of *Elinor* were written by Marko Niemi, Karen Wagner, Maria Engberg, and Hans K. Rustad.

The purpose of *Elinor* was to heighten the attention on electronic literature in general and in particular electronic work written in the Nordic countries, to preserve and archive electronic literature, and to publish and make this literature more accessible. A further goal was to inspire new media writers, and stimulate the production of electronic literature. The project's activities lasted for a year, 2005-2006, and the archive was launched in November 2006.

During that period *Elinor* collected and presented 64 works (27 Finish, 19 Danish, 12 Norwegian and 6 Swedish). Jill Walker Rettberg, as the project manager, did a job of crucial importance in arranging workshops and readings of electronic literature. She arranged a seminar at the University of Bergen where the new media writers Morten Skogly, Anne Bang-Steinsvik, and Scott Rettberg were invited to present their works.

The list of works on *Elinor*'s net site is not complete, but *Elinor*'s archive is the first and so far only one exclusively oriented towards electronic literature in the Nordic countries.

Associational linking practise

The Swedish author and avant-garde artist Karl-Erik Tallmo is one of the earliest authors in Scandinavia to produce literature written not only on but also for a digital computer.

Already in 1988 he wrote a hypertext in Hypercard called *Hamnen (The Harbor)*, where 52 statements are combined in a network structure. Two years later he used hypertext technology to produce a text or dictionary on writing (*Write correctly*), and in 1992 he produced what probably is the first hypertext fiction in Sweden and Scandinavia, called *Iakttagarens förmåga att inngripa (The watcher's ability to interfere)*.

The hypertext fiction contains mostly written text, but some pictures and sounds also appear. In that case this text also in an international context is an early example of multimodal hypertext fiction. As you can see, you can traverse the text by clicking on links, which will provide you with a new text cluster, just like reading *Afternoon* or *Patchwork Girl*. Or you can read the text by using the navigation menu at the right hand side of the screen. As you can see the reader is offered something that looks like a default path by clicking on the arrows. Clicking on links might also causes a small text box to appear in front of the main text cluster, or as a kind of a note on the side of the text. These side notes are sometimes narrative and diegetic, sometimes they look more like a poem, and sometimes they are explanations given by the narrator. Other links again makes more text appears inside the original text. This text

appears as animated text that is temporally manipulated, so the clicking gives the reader an impression that he is just reading half of a sentence, and need to click to make the rest of the sentence appears. Occasionally the reader is asked to “flip” a virtual coin, and the narrative continues based on the result, unintentionally and randomly.

Iakttagarens förmåga att ingripa is a hypertext fiction discussing fatalism as a philosophical view on life. Its about the protagonist Pete, which experiences the lack of options to change the course of his life. Pete is a writer, which stays in New York for some time. During his stay he meets by accident the photographer Johanna. Johanna is on leave from a psychiatric hospital, and Pete enters into a relationship with her, more or less against his own will. Back in Stockholm they move in together, and as they got to know each other they start to discover unknown sides of themselves.

The plot is pretty much like a crime novel, where the author has left traces for the bright reader to discover, and where the ending is unexpected. The title *Iakttagarens förmåga att ingripa* refers just as much to the reader’s situation in hypertext as to the plot and the characters’. For even though the reader is given choices and apparently is able to control the narrative sequence, the macro sequence and the narrative end are fixed and predetermined. Just like *Afternoon* and *Patchwork girl*, Tallmo’s hypertext fiction situates itself in the discussion of the hypertext technology’s democratic potential and the reader’s freedom of choices in hypertext. In this sense *Iakttagarens förmåga att ingripa* contributed to the discussions of newer technological affordances and its impact on the process of writing and reading, and on concepts such as literature, narratives, text, etc., in a Nordic context.

There is a problem concerning the accessibility of the work. It is available on a disc or as an electronic file, which is made available by contacting the author and paying a small fee. But it only runs on a mac, and than a mac with the necessary operation system (like for instance OS 7.1 or OS 9) with Hypercard or Hypercard player. There is also a challenge in that the author is the only one that has the ability to archive the text.

In some Nordic digital work there are obvious connections with literary experimentation on computers, which can be traced back to the multimedia avant-garde. The avant-garde’s impact on the e-lit tradition in the Nordic country can be seen in Tallmo’s work, just as we find it in other early examples of electronic literature. Another example of this relation is the

Norwegian author Tor Åge Bringsværd and the digital text *Faen. Nå har de senket takhøyden igjen. Må huske å kjøpe nye knebeskyttere* (*Damn. They lowered tolerance levels again. Have to remember to buy new kneepads*).

Originally Bringsværd wrote the text as a print text in 1971, in a collection called *Sesam 71* (1971), where it appeared as an interactive short novel where the lexias are hypertextually organised. Inspired by literary experimentations from the 1960s, like Raymond Queneaus *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* and Marc Saportas *Composition No. 1*, Bringsværd's print hypertext plays with literary forms and literature's flexibility. It is unbound and unpaginated, and there exists no template or table of content that reveals an original sequence.

The work has been remediated in digital media a couple of times. In the early 1990s it was digitalised in HTML by Trygve Lillefosse, and a second remediation was done in 1999 by the digital artist Marius Watz. Through the remediation Bringsværd's hypertext represents an early link between print and digital texts that experiments with other principles than the linear, and foregrounds a multilinear text structure and an associative reading. Both as print and as digital hypertext it is an early example of a Norwegian literary hypertext.

Both the Swedish text by Tallmo and the Norwegian text by Bringsværd put forward an associative mode of reading. They then seem to follow Vannevar Bush's cognitive model in his essay "As we may think" (1945), where he argues that our mind do not work in linear sequences but in associational links. At the same time there is as I mentioned an obvious relation between the avant-garde and these early hypertext fictions. Today similar connections can be made with literary experimentations on paper and screen by works of new media writers such as from Norway Morten Skogly, Monica Aasprong, Marte Aas, Marte Huke, Ottar Ormstad, Tale Næss, from Sweden Johannes Heldén, Cia Rinne (which is a Swedish artist), and from Denmark Peter Adolphsen, and Christian Yde Frostholm.

Multimodal work

As we enter into the second half of the 1990s the digital fiction in Scandinavia becomes more and more multimodal. It contains not only verbal text, but also pictures, music, movie clips and so on. And it no longer borrows its shape from print literature. This phase, which Kathrine Hayles calls the second generation or contemporary or postmodern electronic

literature, is actually quite rich in Scandinavia. Because of its motives to make use of pictures, sounds along with written and oral language, this category, whether historical or descriptive, could also be named multimodal electronic literature.

One example of a multimodal work is Tale Næss' *Lys-Mørke (Light-Darkness)*, which is a remediation of a play with the same title. Moving the work into a digital environment Næss makes use of written and verbal text, pictures, graphics, and animations to create a quite different work than the original. She also explained in an interview that the play not really was meant for the stage, but that she was waiting for its right medium. So she utilises facilities of the medium to make the text appear as she first intended.²

The work is interactive in the sense that the reader need to move the mouse courser over the screen to make something happen. The narrative is divided into three different and independent stories, and which of the three stories that appear, depends on where on the screen the reader holds his mouse courser.

One of the narratives is about a fire in a train coupe. Two persons die in the fire, probably kids, and the narrator is probable the father telling us how he remembers the fire. Another of the narratives is about a group of people going in the mountains, than suddenly one of the group members disappears. And the dead body of the person is not found until the snow starts to melt. And the third narrative is about a father taking his two sons on a fishing trip. And one of his sons discovers what might be a dead body. It is hard to tell actually. In the play which is published in a book, the text tells explicit about a dead body that one of the sons finds in the water. While in the digital version, we can hear the son telling his father: "There is something in the water". This part of the narrative actually ends with laughter, so it is hard to tell what actually happened.

The work is about losing someone and/or finding someone, and it demonstrates the big semiotic leap that the work takes from the theatre stage to the digital screen, from a play to a kind of digital narrative. It shows how other semiotic systems can be used to tell the same story, and how the technology can be used to make different scenes, different incidents, collide, because they can be combined and read in different sequences and contexts.

² The interview was made by Norwegian prodcasting's department Ulyd. See http://www.pnek.org/DigiFor/DIG8_Lys.html

Another example from the Scandinavian multimodal tradition is *Langweekend* or *Long Weekend* by Beate C. Rønning, a bilingual work, presented both in Norwegian and English. The work represents a fragmented memory of a bank holiday weekend spent in a city. And the work displays typical incidents from typical places like inside the plain, inside a taxi, at cafés, at the hotel and in the city.

Again there is a combination of photos, written language, music, speech and other sound elements. These different semiotic resources collaborate, or work together in what Roland Barthes would call relay. They telling us different stories, or gives us different information about the place and the surroundings. The picture and the sounds work together to generate the feeling of closeness, a kind of immediacy. An interesting thing here is that in contrast to many other electronic works, the feeling of closeness, immediacy, is here carried mostly by the sounds. When we see the picture from the plain it is the sound of the captain speaking that catches our attention the most. And in the café, the noise from the café guests, sounds of footsteps etc. makes the simulation of a café somewhat strong. It is (almost) as if we're in a café. But as we get the feeling of being in a café, words and sentences start to appear on the screen, subverting the sense of immediacy. The sentences don't make a coherent text, but are for instance in the café fragments from different conversations taking place at other tables. And these fragments underline how the work is caused by small pieces of memory from different places. They are combined through association,

Computer generated texts

In addition to Hayles' two categories or generations of electronic literature, the classic and the postmodern or multimodal, Astrid Ensslin (2007) has proposed a third category, which she, based on Espen Aarseth's concept, calls cybertext literature.

One example, which is a text with significant literary qualities, is the Danish *Ingen elge på vejen den dag* (*No Moose on the Road That Day*) (2001) by Sonja Thomsen.



Ingen elge på vejen den dag is not conceived as a work driven by the reader's desire to solve a central mystery, which is the case in Tallmo's work. There are mysteries here, but not ones that can be solved. This is a computer generated text, in which the reader has no control of the lexias that are available. The work is also temporally manipulated in the sense that the content, and in some cases the plot, changes according to which day the text is read. It looks different today than it did yesterday. And if we retrieve it tomorrow, it would be different. In other words, the reader is not in the position of manipulating the text. The only thing he is in control of is *when* to read the work. And to explore the work and to be able to grasp all the lexias, and all the combinations of texts, pictures, graphics and sounds, the reader has to revisit it every day for several weeks. The reader has to engage in the text in several ways, make some kind of commitment to the text, and more or less sign an imaginative ethic contract with the text where he obligates himself to make regular (daily) visits. The work encourages the reader to experience it as a continuous stream of texts, music, images, representing the character's thoughts and events that melt into one another. To fully experience the work, the reader has to take his time and not rush. The goal though is not to reach the end (because there are none), but rather the journey itself.

The reading in other words is a journey without an end. There are almost always new text clusters, or text clusters recontextualised in new combinations. In that sense the reader might feel trapped, just like the characters in the narrative are to some extent and in a way trapped. The text tells about four characters, what they think and how they interact. They are two

couples, but at some point in our reading we discover that they are not that close friends. Secrets are being revealed. One of the characters is depressed, and is in need of medicine to keep himself mentally stabile.

The work creates a situation or atmosphere of tensely. In one of the text cluster we can read a poem which might appear together with an intense sound:

En glemt flue summer rundt i rummet, støder mot
glasruten igjen og igjen. Oppe i loftet, langt inde i et
hjørne, sidder edderkoppen og venter. Den behøver ikke
gøre noget, endnu.³

Ingen elge på vejen den dag combines different semiotic resources and traditional art discipline like literature, photography, drawing, music and drama. It then is an example of how Scandinavian electronic literature is part of a tradition that blurs the categories between the arts. It is also a collaborative work. Two young Danish authors have written the text, a photographer has provided the pictures, and a sound artist created the music and sound elements.

Hva sier trærne (What are the trees saying? Or perhaps in a more Shakespearan way: What say the trees?) is a poetic artwork by the artist Marte Aas. It consists of written poems as well as facts about trees, a graphic cross section of a tree, where the growth rings are clickable and marked in different colors. Further it contains some sound clips from a radio program about trees, and the reader can also hear the quiet sound of the branches and leafs as the wind blows on them. The text is also connected to a web camera which shows live pictures of a tree. Marte Huke, which is a Norwegian author who also writes poetry books, has produced the written text that constitutes the database that provides or feeds the cybertext poem, and she has also written the static poems which appears when the reader click on one of the color marked growth rings. The work is based on an old folkloristic idea that trees can talk, and explores this through recognizeable semiotic systems. In that sense the poems should be received as “translations” of the trees’ talk.

³ A forgotten flue sums around in the room, encounter the window again and again. Up in the ceiling, in a corner, sits a spider waiting. It does not have to do anything, yet. (my translation).

The work was launched in 2005 and was live for a year. Once a month a new poem for the cross section was added – like the poem of the month. The web cam was online the whole time so the reader could follow the tree day and night in all seasons. Today the work is online, but the web cam is down and replaced by a movie clip which goes in loops, and the sound from the tree is not working any more.

Conclusions

Most of the works mentioned here, and others, are easily accessible, if you know where the links are to be found. They are, like in every other country, accessible on the net, without charge. A few works exist on CD or floppy disc, and yet a handful is only available for downloading, by contacting the author him- or herself and paying a small fee. These broad and fluid modes of distribution, along with too accidental a practise and lack of standards of how to archive and describe electronic literature in the Nordic countries, might make e-works of the 90's quite soon unavailable.

In this respect we are at risk of losing important electronic work. For instance Tallmo's works are not archived by any public library or interest organisation, and are only accessible by contacting the author himself. The consequence of this is that his first hypertext, *Hammen*, no longer is available. A rather different but still fragile situation applies to Michael Valeur's works, *Blackout* (1997) and *Englen (The Angel)*, (1999). These are in a somewhat unique situation. Not only have they reached through an important institutional border by actually being among those few that are archived at a public library, they also gained status as classics. As interactive movies, and through their similarities with computer games, they have just crossed the threshold of the Danish canon, and are valued as two of the most important computer games and digital works published in Denmark. However it is doubtful that the status as classics will change their destiny. Chances of being republished are slim, meaning that they are still hard to pursue, but luckily they are archived in a public library and can be accessed there.