

## Further, Reading

This is the last column in the Platform 2 series. I'm grateful to Vagant for providing me with the opportunity to share some insights into the world of electronic literature over the past two years. I hope the columns have directed readers to some intriguing reading experience made for digital media and perhaps inspired a few writers to consider ways that they might want to play in the vast sandbox offered us by the computer, the network, mobile devices, and other emerging technologies.

In parting I offer some suggestions for further reading about electronic literature. There is a rich and growing body of critical writing about electronic literature. While electronic literature is primarily a network-based digital phenomenon, the establishment of electronic literature as an academic field has been built to a greater extent on printed books that take time to step back and process the digital turn as it is unfolds.

## Foundations

Before the Web, in the early 1990s, two books in particular had an important impact in establishing hypertext fiction and digital textuality more generally as objects of study within literature programs. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*, published by Jay David Bolter in 1991, offered the first serious and detailed investigation of the computer's "writing space" considering the potential effects of its malleability in comparison to the history of the printed book, and the differences between the conceptual space of electronic writing, characterized by fluidity and interactivity between the writer, the reader, and mediating systems. At the same time as Bolter was writing that study, he was also part of the group developing Storyspace, the first hypertext system developed specifically for the creation of literary texts, and the book provides a good basis for understanding the conceptual milieu of early hypertext fictions such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*. George Landow's 1992 book *Hypertext: the Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* linked literary hypertext with postmodern and poststructuralist theory, positing hypertext as a form that materially instantiated concepts such as the death of the author and the decentered individual. If many of Landow's claims seem inflated in retrospect, his work was nevertheless the launch of a small critical industry.

## The Procedural Turn

Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997) and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) served to widen the range of scholarly discourse surrounding electronic literature, opening conversations about artifacts previously excluded from academic study, such as the classic psychologist chatbot ELIZA, or Colossal Cave Adventure, the first textual computer game. Aarseth sought to redefine terms, focusing not on hypertext but more generally on cybertext: "ergodic literature" in which "non-trivial effort" is required in order to "traverse the text." Focusing on the texts he studied in a structural way, Aarseth pointed out that there is nothing essentially digital about the cybertext category: rule-driven combinatorial literatures ranging from the I Ching to Choose-Your-Own-Adventure works existed in print long before the personal computers or the internet came along. Aarseth also usefully constructed a typology of variables that could be used to differentiate between different types of cybertexts. *Cybertext* successfully complicated the arbitrary division between "computer game" and "literary work." Likewise, Murray's *Holodeck* was less focused on hypertext fiction and more on "interactive drama" and interactive characters, such as chatbots. Beginning with the fictional richly sensory interactive environment imagined in the Star Trek series, Murray described a number of interactive storytelling systems and conversational agents that she viewed as steps towards fully immersive interaction.

Aarseth's work can be said to have led to the development of "ludology" and the establishment of a separate field of games studies. This was one outcome of a protracted "ludology vs. narratology" debate, the crux of which was whether games should be studied primarily in the same context as literary artifacts or are formally distinct enough to demand their own conceptual category—suffice it to say that the games won. Narratologists have nevertheless done some important work in untangling the structural complexities of digital media narratives, most notably by Marie-Laure Ryan, in her *Avatars of Story* (2006).

Over the course of the past decade, literary theorist N. Katherine Hayles turned her focus from speculative fiction to electronic literature in exploring concepts of the posthuman, embodiment, and materiality. Her

*Writing Machines* (2002) is an inventive exploration of “technotexts” – the first exploring writing machines including Talan Memmott’s *Lexia to Perplexia* as well as print novels, Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* and Tom Phillips’ alternate novel *A Humantment*. Hayles’s *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008) is described as the first systematic survey of the field. The first chapter “Electronic Literature: What Is It?” is an accomplished and broad introduction to e-lit, while further chapters explore the relation between machine and human cognition through readings of individual works.

### **Digging deeper into genres**

In recent years as the field has matured and developed, electronic literature criticism has moved from broader theoretical approaches to nuanced readings of particular genres.

Nick Montfort’s *Twisty Little Passages* (2003) is the first book-length study of interactive fiction. Montfort tracks the genre from its origins in the first commercial computer games, the text adventures such as *Zork* published in the 1980s, through to the present day. A small but active community of writers has created an impressive body of work in the genre, producing novelistic text adventures that are more novel than game. Montfort’s study examines the poetics of the form, finding connections between the form of the classic riddle and the puzzles around which many of these interactive narratives are built.

David Ciccorico’s *Reading Network Fiction* (2007) offers an engaging study of hypertext fictions published both pre- and post-Web. Ciccorico’s work explores not the environment or nature of the work published on the global network, but rather the narrative poetics of network structures, emergent and recombinant narratives built around cycles, recurrence, expansion, and return.

Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s *Expressive Processing* (2009) provides a tour of the fascinating world of storytelling systems. The study ranges from experimental systems designed to actually write stories, such as James Meehan’s *Tale-Spin*, a generative system that produced rudimentary animal fables, to contemporary interactive drama projects, such as Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern’s *Façade*, that puts the interactive

reader in the role of actively trying to mediate a dispute between two friends in the midst of a marital dispute, as well as the story engines that sit beneath computer game fictions.

### **Remix Aesthetics and Close Reading Digital Art**

I had the pleasure of picking up two recent titles, *remixthebook* by Mark Amerika (2011), and Roberto Simanowski's *Digital Art and Meaning; Reading Kinetic Poetry, Text Machines, Mapping Art, and Interactive Installations* (2011) from the authors during digital art conferences last week in Istanbul and Ljubljana.

Mark Amerika was one of the first literary artists to take the Internet seriously as an expressive medium. His Amerika Online column took avant-garde literary methods online back in 1993, and his *Grammatron* was one of the first novel-length hypertexts on the web. At some point, Amerika moved from literary culture to the art world (from the used book shop to the Whitney biennial), and remade himself into a net artist and professional remixologist. In *remixthebook*, Amerika both exemplifies and inhabits the remix techniques that are the subject of the book. Amerika samples, mashes up, subverts and recycles writers, artists, artists and philosophers ranging from Albert North Whitehead, Nam June Paik, Allan Ginsberg, to Steve Martin in exploring and explaining his own approach to digital media. Along the way, he provides a pseudoautobiography that demonstrates how his background as a fiction writer and friendships with experimental novelists such as Kathy Acker and Ronald Sukenick shaped his approach. Amerika's book is a kind of manifesto for one of the potential kinds of literary artists of the future. Amerika himself flows freely between literary, conceptual, and performance art, video and audio production, and VJ-style happenings. *Remixthebook* is a compelling trip through the mixed media, culture bending environment Amerika plays in. Perhaps most valuably, this work offers some insight into the literary practices that might come after the book while clearly demonstrating how the literature of late postmodernism is connected to and in many ways, makes these forms possible.

Simanowski's book offers evidence that criticism of electronic literature and digital art has definitively moved from the abstraction of broad critical theory to serious engagement with individual cultural artifacts —

what used to be called close reading. Simanowski argues in favor of hermeneutic reading, attempting to wrestle with the meaning of digital artifacts and practices ranging from poetry generators to interactive installations. He does not always find that the works reward “reading” in the way that we used to think of reading literature: indeed he finds that many interactive installations in fact cannibalize the texts that they use as material, moving their readers from the space of contemplation to the space of spectacle. But he does not stop at a eulogy. If some of the experiences he describes strip written text of its meaning, the experience as a whole of engaging with, for instance, a poem that reacts to the movements of the readers body in space, offers its own interpretative frame, in which the text is only one element. Simanoski’s search for meaning is not fruitless.

I talked with both Amerika and Simanowski during the course of my travels, and both have left me with two somewhat opposing ideas about the future of electronic literature. It may be that electronic literature is a practice working towards its own extinction. On the one hand, Amerika suggested, in a few years or a decade’s time, we will no longer think of a distinction between print and electronic literature. That is to say, literature at large is already digital. The production of books in print is just one manifestation, one cultural practice among many in which the contemporary literary artist engages. On the other hand, Simanowski might suggest that the concept of electronic literature was always wrong, that the sorts of engagement enabled by digital media artifacts don’t map well onto the practices of literary reading, that they instead offer signs of a deeply mediated culture becoming something other than it once was. I myself am uncertain as to what electronic literature will become or unbecome next, but I plan to stick around to watch the written word renew itself, as it always has.