



## A [S]creed for Digital Fiction

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### Introduction<sup>2</sup>

The sky was the color of a screen, churning code into a maelstrom.

It blew through the Wheel of Sheffield, and we blinked amid the post-utopian flicker of hypertext theory and the fast shadows of the Late Age of Print.

A viral meme circulated above us, growing, morphing, forming a cloud of tags: digital media - literary practice - literary study - reading - art - materiality. Below us were roots turning fields of promiscuous linkages into systems.

Revolutions take time, some (read: Gutenberg) much more than others (read: Gates), and that wheel (read: Ferris) in its languid rotations was a figure for our desire to do something that might be odd, out of character, or almost anachronistic in the midst of the raging torrent of the digital age: we paused. And at rest, we reflected, not so much on what digital media will mean for literary practice and literary studies, and reading itself, but what it has already meant.

We sought to sow rhizomes, till topologies, define a field of scholarship that would conduct systematic, fine-grained analyses of literary fiction in a snarl of networked and programmable media.

What better place for our ideas about 'literary machines' to take shape and solidify? What better place to forge a conception of a new literary art emerging from a new materiality? We were there in the crucible city, a city that wears its material history on its coal-stained sleeve, that fired in its own belly the iconic objects of the industrial age.

A manifesto is political; a mission statement is corporate. We deleted these concepts from our discussion. We were not etching a scroll of aesthetic edicts for the digital ages. We were not carving a credo in the sense of monologic truth or certainty, of liberation, of democratization, of salvation, of renewal.

What emerged was a platform of critical principles to guide us in our exploration of digital-literary art, a foundation for any claim to the cultural and literary significance of fiction written on and for a computer screen. What emerged moves through motherboards, cycles through silicone circuits across endless screens and keyboards, roiling through artists' code, readers' clicks, and scholars' listserves... returning, as it does, from the most disembodied forms of electronic machinery to the embodied structures of critical consciousness, or imagination (before setting out again).

What emerged was a creed for the screen. In a word, a [s]creed.

### A [s]creed for digital fiction embraces...

close analysis. We take a bottom-up approach. We base our conclusions on examples. We substantiate every critical assertion with a case. Theory is vital to us but analyses provide the evidence on which we base our conjectures. In scholarship, it is not sufficient to talk only of the pleasurable or intimidating experiences of reading digital fiction. Anecdotal tales of our frustrations or delights, even when they are compelling, do not yield interpretations. When we lose our thread or become deeply engrossed, we isolate and interrogate the mechanisms that are responsible (Rustad 2009). We are heavily invested in the questions that empirical and analytical readings yield (Ensslin and Bell 2007) with an awareness of close reading as a historical medium specific practice.

code. As critics primarily and coders peripherally, we recognize the importance of code in

digital fiction, and we do so on a continuum. On the one end, the incorporation and recombination of elements of programming language, binary code, and mark-up conventions implicitly affects the semantic space of the text. On the other end, the same codestuff can be used explicitly, infecting and inflecting the text to defamiliarize the work of art.

cybersomatics and corporeality. We believe that the reading of digital fiction involves a different kind of connection with the text because we sit in front of a computer, bodily integrated with the machine, and at the same time ontologically separated from the world that it describes. We are dually embodied - embodied proper, as 'actual' users of hardware and software, and re-embodied through our (fictional) representations as implied readers in the virtual domain. In experiencing digital fiction, we become part of a cybernetic feedback loop, in which we feed and are fed back perpetually. We are immersed in a continual stimulus-response circuit, a self-regulatory mechanism, to speak with Norbert Wiener and against René Descartes. The text is us. The machine is us. They are us-ing us as we are us-ing them - in an abstract amalgamation of genetic, linguistic and algorithmic coding (Ensslin 2009, 2010a/b).

digital fiction, of course, which, in our DeFINition, is fiction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium.

gender & digital writing technologies. We embrace cyberfeminism, technofeminism, postfeminism, or any feminism that makes a meaningful engagement with digital media and digital fiction as a mode of expression. But as true 'Patchwork Girls' we are wary of notions that the same digital writing technologies, namely hypertext, are somehow inherently "feminine" in form, or embody some essential aspect of women's writing; that is, we steer away from any understanding that simply reverses patriarchal modes of technological determinism on feminist terms.

generations. Authors will inevitably exploit the latest technologies and, as techno-junkies, we eagerly await the fruits of that labor. But, a Storyspace hypertext is potentially just as interesting to us as a Flash or HyperCard fiction. Each facilitates narrative and semiotic experimentation and for that reason we analyze generations of digital fiction inclusively. Whether there are three: hypertext, hypermedia, cybertext (Ensslin 2007). Or two: pre-Web & post-Web. Or one. Or more. Or none at all. It is the aesthetic force, reflexive engagement and complexity of a fiction, rather than its place in a process of technological advancement, that captures our imagination and determines our *raison d'être*. To this end, we embrace media archaeology as a critical methodology important to the study of digital fiction and to fictions about digitality.

immersion & interaction (or participation or input), or more specifically the tension that arises between the two poles. We don't think that a multilinear digital narrative that constantly requires your attendance at a screen as well as your input through some sort of device can be immersive in the same way that a print narrative (Bell 2010a, 2010b). But we do think it can be immersive in a different way (Ciccioricco 2007, Rustad 2009, Ensslin 2009, 2010a/b). After all, digital fiction isn't just 'read', or 'watched', or 'played' - it is 'experienced', and these experiences have to be seen as all-encompassing phenomenological processes.

internationality. We are an international group invested in analyzing digital fiction across languages and cultures.

lines. Some of the earliest hypertextualists did not care much for the notion of "nonlinearity," and rightly asked: why define digital textuality in terms of negation and lack when in fact digital fictions embrace a multiplicity of lines rather than a lack of any one true line? We see multilinearity as a defining element of digital fiction and we see it manifesting itself in ways that are distinctive to its medium. At the same time, we keep in mind that reading itself is a temporal act that is characterized by its irrefutable linearity, which is undertaken by an irrefutably embodied reader.

medial affordances. We pay as much attention to the means of dissemination - screen, speaker, software - as we do to the fictions they collectively transmit. We preach that a VDU is not a codex and that a node is not a page. We recognize that HTML, Storyspace and Flash each offer different tools and permit different kinds of modal, structural, and aesthetic experimentation. Media-specifics are acknowledged in our theory and our analyses.

modal affordance. We pay as much attention to the means of representation - text, image, sound - as we do to the fictions they collectively construct. We identify the

possibilities and constraints under which digital fictions are produced and received. A semiotic approach to digital fiction allows us, as analysts, to reflect on the ways in which different modal affordances are or can be utilized in a work.

multimedial and multimodal interplay. Multimedia and multimodal works are inevitably always more than just a simple remediation of analogue media or a sum of their constituent elements. Call it convergence, call it divergence: we close-read the interaction between media and modes.

narratological approaches. From the classical distinction between plot and story to the post-classical analysis of actual versus fictional worlds, we use rigorous methods and well established terminology. Narrative theory allows interpretations of (digital) narrative fiction to be based on sound structural foundations but we explore the extent to which print-oriented narratological approaches apply to non-print texts. We investigate and suggest theoretical tenets arising from their distinct (inter-)medial and ludic qualities.

networks. Nodal, modal, medial, and human. Our working methods replicate many of the texts we study. We mix approaches in order to generate holistic conclusions. We are committed to the efficacy of collaborative working. As the open source Linus, famously says: given enough eyeballs, all misinterpretations are shallow. 

**Ed Finn responds:** Linus may be right, but sometimes all the eyeballs look the wrong way. Part of what makes networks so interesting is the ways in which they break, reroute, and disperse information (and not just link and gather it). So much digital literature, and its criticism, addresses the points at which the network breaks: transient texts, unrepeatable experiences, and art at the margins. I'm confident your work will revel in these challenges, combating 'digital Maoism' and the seductive power of networks that shunt us only to safe, well-traveled places.

nodes and nodal coherence. As the building blocks of any networked text and many-a-digital fiction, we treat nodes as semantic units that are meaningful both independent of and in relation to the larger network in which they reside. The idea of a node is exciting to us in terms of digital textuality: it is a new bibliographical unit peculiar to digital environments (i.e. chapter, footnote, stanza, node).

reflexivity. We believe that self-consciousness in fiction takes on broader associations when the written word must locate itself among several modes. Given that any fiction can refer not just to its fictionality but also to its materiality, digital fictions deliver a new form of reflexivity. In addition to discursive playfulness which is found within the text, the screen on which it is read, the mouse with which it is clicked, and the code in which it is written can all be used to alert the reader to the ontological status of the work and the world that it describes.

readers. We assert that different readers and different kinds of readers interact with digital fictions in diverse ways (Rustad 2009).

reading. Is there really even any place for a contemplative literary art in digital environments inundated with the audio-visual, the animated, and the immediate? We think so. And we think that the analyses of digital fiction that are now emerging attest to the fact that literary complexity can - and has - migrated to digital environments. And yet, we are aware that reading practices and, indeed, our notion of literacy is changing and try to be attentive to these changes in focus and practice.

re-reading. The analysis of any literary text involves re-reading. Digital fictions, and network fictions in particular, take the practice of re-reading to another level because the recycling of nodes, is fundamental to (hyper)textual comprehension (Ciccoricco 2007). Digital fictions encourage and cultivate an 'aesthetics of revis(it)ation' (Ensslin 2007) - as every re-reading results in a revision of the previously constructed mental image of the text.

semiotics. As analysts of multimodal works, we must isolate, interrogate and interpret signs from a variety of semiotic systems and their meaningful interplay.

stylistics. Analyzing the way in which a digital fiction is written reveals how meaning is constructed linguistically. Whether it be word, phrase, clause, or sentence, we scrutinize signifier and signified, forms and functions, denotative and connotative meanings. While we "read" audiovisual and verbal modes, we are inspired and guided by the written word and the symbolic meanings it activates.

systematic methodologies. We are unabashed about our structuralist predilections and flaunt our formalist leanings. We make observations that are transparent and utilize

replicable techniques. We analyze according to an explicit method whether that be based on narrative theory (Bell 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Ensslin 2010a/b, forthcoming; Ciccoricco 2007; Laccetti 2009), stylistics (Bell 2007, Ensslin 2007), New Criticism (Pressman 2008), semiotics (Ensslin 2009, Rustad 2010), aesthetic reception theory (Rustad 2009) or any other systematic analytic approach.

theoretical waves. We perceive that the study of digital fiction has undergone a significant paradigm shift from a first-wave of theoretical debate to a second-wave of methodological analysis (Bell 2010a, 2010b; Ciccoricco 2007; Ensslin 2007; Ensslin and Bell 2007). While first-wave theory sought to understand digital fiction predominantly in terms of abstract poststructuralist models, we see the second-wave as offering an explicit application of theorized practices. We collaborate in order to harmonize second-wave theory by establishing clarifications, modifications, and supplementations to current methods. While we embrace and endorse second-wave approaches, we are indebted to and build upon first-wave foundations.

topologies. It's no longer location location location they say, but connection connection connection. To speak topologically is to speak the language of links and nodes and, more broadly, the language of narrative fiction in digital environments. As scholars of digital textuality, we are prepared to move away from the dominant literary-critical paradigm of a textual topography and speak more accurately of textual topology (Ciccoricco 2007).

[The] Web. It is one of our primary means of consumption and dissemination. It houses creative works that interest us and stages critical debates in which we engage. This is not to say that we favor web fictions over digital fictions stored on data carriers. Needless to add, those are commonly traded online as well...

### **A [s]creed for digital fiction deliberately neglects...**

...blogs,

...communitarian digital fiction,

...digital storytelling,

... and any other form of digital narrative that does not qualify as fiction. While we welcome the authorial democratization that Web 2.0 technology permits and wholeheartedly support research that seeks to understand it, life narratives are fundamentally nonfiction and therefore beyond our remit.

...e-books. While Project Gutenberg and Google books, e-readers and Kindle all fantastically facilitate reading great works of print online (be it Shakespeare, Austen or Nabokov), the meaning of these paper-under-glass texts is not intrinsically linked to, enhanced by, or affected by the digital. They do not qualify as digital fiction, at least not according to our DeFINition.

...games we can't 'read', or rather games where there is no dynamic relationship between the gameplay (rules) and its themes (representations) that we can read into, reflect on, or interpret.

But enough of what we don't do and a return to what we do...

Above all, we believe that digital media do not dispossess us of the interpretive reading practices that we have developed relative to print, but we are certain that they do imply a new mode of literary study and analysis. Reading texts in digital environments still involves critical practices that have been developed in print scholarship: it still involves analyzing linguistic, structural, semiotic, intertextual and semantic elements. However, it also involves digital literacy.

Let us elucidate further...

In print environments, you can analyze a sound or syllable, a word, a line, a stanza or an entire poem. You can analyze a paragraph or an entire novel. In digital environments, you can do the same. But you can also analyze a node or a path of nodes and this will inevitably include a reading of the links that both separate and connect them, so that the object of reading is a navigational structure and its enactment. You can analyze processes, movements, interactions and the dictates of the underlying code. You can analyze images (either static or dynamic) and sound (be it music, voice or noise). You can analyze hardware and software, as well as the machine-human interface, and their receptive and aesthetic effects.

Exploiting the latest body of research, the DFIN will produce a body of exemplary analyses of digital fiction substantiated by robust theoretical and terminological conclusions. We will develop a range of tools and associated terminology for digital fiction analysis and provide a body of criticism based on the close reading of a range of digital fiction texts. Implicit in such an agenda is a revisioning of what "close reading" means for a work of fiction that is written for and read on a computer screen, that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and that would lose something of its aesthetic function if it were removed from that medium. In the spirit of techno-literary revolutions, it is to this enterprise that we now turn...

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