



# What is and to What End Do We Read Digital Literature? Opening Words

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## Abstract

Traditional literature dreamt of readers who are the heros of the text they read - and are killed while reading. Digital literature indeed bridges the gap between the world of the narrative and the world of the recipient. Here the reader can kill and being killed. This introduction to the US-German conference Reading Digital Literature talks about the differences between print and digital literature. It explains why digital literature is only digital if it is not only digital, why the code is not the text unless it is the text, to what extent a hermeneutics of digital signs requires a new methodological approach, and holds that "digital literacy" after all is still inevitably based on reading skills.

## The killed reader

Imagine a reader reading a story about an adulterous couple planning to kill the woman's husband. This reader is completely engrossed; reading about the planned murder from his comfortable chair by his fireplace gives him an almost perverse pleasure. Reading the description of the house the murderer enters, he thinks of his own house. Then he reads that the man enters the room in which the husband character is sitting by the fire; it's too late for him to avoid the knife his wife's lover rams into his chest.

This reader exists. In a short story by Julio Cortázar: *La continuidad de los parques* (The Continuity of Parks) of 1964. Cortázar is not the only writer who tried to turn the reader into a character. Italo Calvino, in his novel *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, gives the reader the main role in the book, and narrates in the second person. In Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the hero finds a book entitled *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and reads it until he comes to the page in which he is reading the very same book. There have been many such experiments in late modern or post-modern times. After the all-knowing author of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

had long been dismissed, authors fantasized about regaining omnipotence by having a direct impact on the reading situation.

Now, in the cases of Cortázar and Márquez the reader is himself part of the text which another, real reader is reading. And in Calvino's case, the *illusion* relies on the reader's willingness to be addressed. Unfortunately, or rather, fortunately, it is not possible to literally draw the reader into the story. The author has no way of directly killing the reader. Sure, one could poison the paper, as in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. But the poison is not applied by the author and is not part of the text. Literature cannot bridge the gap between the world of the narrative and the world of the recipient. Well, conventional literature cannot. Digital literature can.

## Real clocks and virtual hand grenades

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was popular to integrate a tiny mechanical clock in paintings at the spot where there would be a painted clock. The clock in the painted interior hence presented the real time and thus belonged to the world of the spectator. The world of the painting and the world of the recipient were bridged. But the bridge was broken when, for example, the painting was of a dinner scene but the museum closed at noon. Rather than being drawn in, the viewer was thus pushed away into a mode of meta-reflection reaffirming the gap between the painted world and the real world.

Digital media are more successful in connecting the viewer's time and the artwork's time. In the German collaborative online writing project *23:40*, for example, one can write a text recalling a particular moment and specify the time when this text will be presented on the website each day. The bridge between text time and reader time works pretty well because the writer knows what time the reader sees his text and can determine whether the description of a romance is available only at 2 AM or at noon.

John McDaid's 1992 hyperfiction *Uncle Boddy's Phantom Funhouse* contains a link to a level which the reader does not have permission to access. If the reader clicks the link anyway, a message appears declaring that the reader has to be killed for trespassing. Although it's the program that is then *terminated*, the reader is indeed killed *as* reader in so far as there is no reader without text.

The killing is easier the other way around. In the 1997 hyperfiction *Zeit für die Bombe*, by Susanne Berkenheger of Germany, the reader encounters a situation where the character, Iwan, opens a stolen suitcase which turns out to contain a time bomb with a button to arm it. The text reads:

Don't we all always want to push, turn or click something to make something happen without any effort? This is the best. Isn't it? Iwan, come on, do it, push the little button.

It is up to the reader to push the bomb's button by clicking a link. This naturally upsets Iwan, who starts insulting the reader for sitting comfortably in her chair by the fireplace pretending compassion but really deriving excitement from watching him run through freezing Moscow carrying a time bomb. Iwan then threatens the reader: „Look“, he says, „what I have here in my hand. Do you see my little hand-grenade? Now you can have compassion for yourself.“ While the bomb finally explodes, tearing Iwan apart, the hand-grenade is never used, not even to shut down the program. Lucky reader. He benefits from the early days of digital literature when authors didn't know how far they could go when entering the readers' world. After all, they wanted their text to be read. And how many readers would try again after the programs shut down? Thus, the author leaves it at the allusion to Aristotle's concept of catharsis and does not program any fatal links or send any dangerous viruses.

## Killing the text

However, the killing is not over. Berkenheger's hyperfiction links to another kind of killing; this time the opponents are not author and reader but the different media involved.

After the reader arms the time bomb, we see the following text: „And the bomb ticked“ with the word »bomb« blinking. This exemplifies what additional means digital literature possesses in contrast to print literature: Time. The text becomes, as Kate Hayles puts it in one of her essays, „eventilized“.<sup>1</sup> The text is based on code and this code not only makes the word »bomb« appear on the screen but also interrupts this appearance.

This sentence also points to some core questions of digital literature. Why is »bomb« blinking? Shouldn't the verb blink since it's the one that signifies the action? But a blinking verb would only translate its message into another language. The version the author chose is absolutely correct from a logical point of view; *processing* the action signified requires the *agent* to blink. From an aesthetic point of view, however, its redundancy is problematic. The word »bomb« is blinking, so why do we also need the verb »ticked«? There are two languages here: the linguistic language which denominates an action and the language of performance which presents an action. It is as if the stage directions of a play were acted out and also spoken.

The author could easily have had the two languages cooperate: „And the bomb“. Since the signifier for »bomb« already presents the action of the signified, the verb is actually dispensable. Of course this is not the end of the alteration and adjustment of language in digital media. The next step could be to use the icon of a bomb, the step after that to make the signifier honest and have, rather than a blinking icon, a ticking sound.

To generalize, what we have here is the elimination of the text, its substitution by image, sound, and action. Such operation is a common feature in digital media for which Thomas Swiss and Karin Wenz are going to give various examples in their essays. In many cases the operation looks like a mere supplementation of the text. But supplementing text with an image *does* actually mean eliminating the text for what is shown as an image does not need to be described with words. The paradigm of expression changes from creating a world in the reader's *imagination* based on a specific combination of letters to *presenting* a world directly to the audience through extra-lingual means.

Actually, this substitution of text is the justification of digital literature. If an object only consists of static letters it does not really need digital media and hence should not be called digital literature even though it may be presented on the Internet. By definition, digital literature must go beyond what could be done without digital media. By definition, digital literature must be more than just literature otherwise it is only literature in digital media. This would, no doubt, also be very interesting from a sociological perspective. Think of all the text presented on websites and blogs, bypassing any police of the discourse and any publisher's evaluation. However, that is another matter and another book. This book is not about who writes literature but about how the materiality of literature changes when the digital technology is used for aesthetic reasons and not just for distribution.

Two aspects of the change from literature to digital literature should be clear by now: In digital literature the reader of the story can kill the character in the story, and the bomb can blink, tick and - in the form of a virus or a shutdown – also “explode”. There is a third aspect that should be stressed: Digital literature is only digital if it is not only digital. What do I mean by this?

Almost ten years ago, John Cayley in his essay *The Code is not the Text (Unless it is the Text)* described alphabetic language as a digital structure since it consists of a small set of symbols that can be endlessly combined and recombined. Instead of analog elements like in painting, we have distinct linguistic units that are either there or not, with no option in between. In her essay *The Time of Digital Poetry* Hayles reminds us of Cayley's notion and concludes that the computer is not the first medium to use digitized language but rather “carries further a digitizing process already begun by the transcription of speech into alphabetic letters.”<sup>2</sup>

I absolutely agree that literature was digital even before it extended into digital media. In digital media, literature is digital in a double sense: It uses a small set of distinct, endlessly combinable symbols, and those symbols are now produced by binary code. The first sense of digitality refers to the semiotic paradigm of the material (the distinct units), the second sense of digitality refers to the operational paradigm of the medium (the binary code as basis for all data in digital media). If we agree on the criterion that digital technology is used for aesthetics, not just for presentation, then being digital in this double sense is not enough to be considered "digital literature". Or actually, I should say: that's one "digital" too many... because using the old system of symbols in a new medium only creates literature *in* digital media, but not digital literature.

Obviously one doesn't need digital media to create text consisting only of re-combinable linguistic units, but if the text blinks or disappears, if it is an *event* rather than an *object*, then it really needs the screen rather than the page. When text is "eventualized" it also stops being purely digital in the semiotic sense, since, in contrast to alphabetic language, the language of performance, sound and visual signs does *not* consist of discrete units. Non-linguistic signs are, as Roland Barthes phrased it in his essay *Rhetoric of the Image*, "not founded on a combinatory system of digital units as phonemes are". This notion insists on a more precise concept of text in the heyday of an extended concept of text 30 years ago. As Hayles argues in her essay on *Slippingglimpse*, in digital literature the inscription of verbal symbols shrinks "to a subset of 'writing' in general." Hayles puts the word »writing« in quotation marks suggesting that this kind of writing produces a kind of text that also needs quotation marks: text that is not *really* text or not *only* text. What, however, is the text in digital literature?

## Digital Hermeneutics

John Cayley gave one of his essays the programmatic title *The Code is Not the Text Unless it Is the Text*. According to him, code is only text insofar as it *appears* as text. An example is *Perl Poetry*, a genre in which natural language is mixed with the syntax of Perl code in a kind of insider poetry for programmers. If, in contrast, the code runs to *generate* text, the code itself is not text. This is true with respect to the *linguistic* concept of text Barthes refers to. If we use Hayle's broad concept of writing, the code is the text even if it is not the text; the effect of the code – making a word blink or tick, for instance – is part of the "text" and needs to be "read" alongside the blinking, ticking word itself.

Whether we use the broad, figurative concept of text – enclosed in quotation marks if necessary – or whether we insist on the *linguistic* quality of text, it should be clear

that when it comes to digital literature we need to “read”, or let’s say, to interpret, not just the text but also what happens to the text. As a rule of thumb one may say: If nothing happens to the text its not digital literature. As a result, when we read digital literature, we have to shift from a hermeneutics of linguistic signs to a hermeneutics of intermedial, interactive, and processing signs. It is not just the meaning of the words that is at stake, but also the meaning of the performance of the words which, let’s not forget, includes the interaction of the user with the words. We should always explore these different elements and their possible connections—though there may not be a significant relationship between them.

One could argue that a hermeneutics of digital signs require a completely new methodological approach. However, it is probable that the discussion of digital literature ought best to be a combination of new and old criteria. As Fotis Jannidis proves in his paper, genre theory is still a valid analytical tool for the discussion of computer games. The analysis can benefit from concepts developed in the past such as »story«, »plot«, and »character« or theoretical frameworks such as reader-response theory, formalism, inter-discourse theory. As Jörgen Schäfer’s analysis of the interactive drama *Façade* shows, knowing genre history helps realize that this cutting-edge piece refers to the oldest and most traditional theoretical drama model.

*Façade* is also a good illustration of the fact that authors often make decisions about characters and plot based on technological constraints, as opposed to just artistic intention. For instance: though it’s amazing how, as the guest in the two characters’ home, you are able to “say” anything to them via your keyboard and influence the progression of their argument, sometimes the program can’t handle your input, in which case the husband and wife seem to ignore you. This technical limitation is acceptable because the two are presented as self-absorbed, “difficult” people. Their personalities are not necessarily a choice of the authors; they are a requirement to keep the interaction plausible despite the technological challenge. A hermeneutic of digital signs has to take into account the possibility of such technological determinism.

So far I have evoked murder, adultery, time bombs, and hand-grenades. Let me talk now about ... cannibalism. To begin, I’ll borrow from Chris Funkhouser: his lecture at the Electronic Poetry Festival in Paris in May 2007 drew a connection between *creative cannibalism and digital poetry*, saying that digital poetry “devours other texts” by appropriating, transforming and reconfiguring them. Funkhouser evoked ritual anthropophagy, the practice of killing and eating the other in order to inherit his qualities. A form of digital cannibalism can be seen in Camille Utterback’s and Romy Achituv’s interactive installation *Text Rain* (1999), whose large screen shows letters rain down onto your projected shadow. As you collect them on your silhouette, the letters form words and sentences taken from a contemporary poem.<sup>3</sup> However, as I experienced it, and as I saw others experiencing it, one mostly does

not engage in the reading process, but rather plays with the rain of letters. The text has been transformed into visual objects. As Francisco Ricardo argues in his essay on *Text Rain*, the transmodal text exists as a series of several phenomenological moments of which the last bring back its lexical, linguistic character and, to say so, undo the cannibalism.

A very subtle example of text cannibalism is the installation *Listening Post*, which Rita Raley explores in her paper. Since it features a curtain of screens quoting from live Internet chats, one would think it is all about text. But, if you step back from the screens and take in the installation as a whole, you're not really reading anymore; you're perceiving this plethora of text as part of a trance-like experience. A very gentle form of "eating the text," that lies, in the end, in the feet of the reader.

## Digital Humanities

Stephanie Strickland's video-poetry-collage *Slippingglimpse* provides at one point the following words:

I find myself kind of alone at the Academy  
they're into turning out people  
who can get jobs  
in the animation industry

In the context of the conference "Reading Digital Literature" N, Katherine Hayles stated in an email: "Now that the initial waves of enthusiasm, hype and counter-hype have given way to sustained creative production and critical inquiry, it is time to move away from highly generalized accounts into detailed and specific readings that account, in media-specific ways, for the practices, effects, and interpretations of important works." How do close readings help develop *digital literacy* – to use one of the buzzwords of digital humanities?

They help insofar as digital literacy cannot be reduced to the competence in using digital technology but also entails an understanding of the language of digital media. Like cinematic literacy develops by understanding the meaning of techniques such as close ups, cuts, cross-fading and extradiegetic music, digital literacy develops by exploring the semiotics of the technical effects in digital media. I think such "reading" competence in the realm of digital media can best be developed by talking about examples of digital *art*. Since art by default is always more or less concerned with its own materiality, it seems to be the best candidate for a hermeneutic exercise that aims to make us aware of the politics of meaning in digital media. However, as Fotis Jannidis argues, such close reading must not be limited to what is considered art but should also include pop culture, such as ego shooter games.

After all, almost a century after Duchamp's first ready-made it has become more and more difficult to tell what is and what isn't art.

However, the difficulty in defining art is not the only challenge scholars of digital aesthetics are dealing with. Another challenge is to combine what Hayles has described as hyper and deep attention. (4) While deep attention, "the cognitive style traditionally associated with the humanities, is characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens)", hyper attention "is characterized by switching focus rapidly between different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom." The image Hayles finds for this position is the young representative of the "Generation M" (M for media) sitting in front of a console, jamming on a joystick while playing "Grand Theft Auto". Hayles points out that each cognitive mode has advantages and limitations and that therefore it is important to balance the ongoing trend toward hyper attention by appropriate measures in the educational environment. According to Hayles, digital media offer important resources in building bridges between deep and hyper attention. She exemplifies how critical interpretation can be exercised while engaging with interactive fiction and concludes that our responsibilities as educators and our position as practitioners of the literary arts require paying attention to the "frustrating, zesty, and intriguing ways in which the two cognitive modes interact with one another." One does not need to be a programmer in order to do so.

For one thing, most of the scholars in the field of digital aesthetics were born too early. During their formative years there was no curriculum that combined humanities and technology. We may wish we were able to create the sophisticated animations or interactivity we discuss. However, we are proud of what we bring to the table where the future scholars of digital humanities are educated: *reading* skills. It is our duty to make sure the university turns out people who not only know how to generate impressive animation or how to program a specific grammar of interaction but also – and maybe even more importantly – know how to read such animation, how do understand such interaction.

## References

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2. N. Katherine Hayles: The Time of Digital Poetry: From Object to Event, in: Adelaide Morris and Thomas Swiss (ed.): *New Media Poetics. Contexts, Techno-texts, and Theories*, MIT Press 2006, pp. 181-209: 189
3. The poem is called "Talk, You" and can be found in Evan Zimroth's book *Dead, Dinner, Or Naked* (1993).
4. N. Katherine Hayles: "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes", *Profession* 2007 (New York: Modern Language Association)