Towards an Aesthetics of Digital Literature

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1. Necessity of evaluation

Regarding digital literature there are four groups to distinguish:

> a) those, who produce digital literature,
> b) those, who read it,
> c) those, who ignore it, and
> d) those, who read digital literature to review it.

I admit to belong to the last group. I am not sure, if authors prefer scholars of literature, who belong to the group of ignorants, rather than the ones who are reviewers. I also understand, there might be some reasons that make a meeting of authors and critics tricky. The sense of innovation, the creative genius doesn't quite fit with the eagerness to comment and criticize – especially when old standards for new phenomena are used. Nevertheless, we need to discuss digital literature from an academic perspective. At least if there are public competitions of digital literature, as there have been in Germany for three years now (organized by the newspaper DIE ZEIT and IBM), and if a jury has to evaluate and to justify their judgement, we need certain criteria to look at digital literature.

We need an aesthetics of digital literature – not as much an aesthetics, which is about art and truth, perception, social impact, mimesis and catharsis, but an aesthetics, which is about the right use of poetical or technical means. The more the literary field of digital literature is being established – and it is about to be established considering the number of conferences, awards, magazines, marketing companies and a growing digital-literature-author-society – the less it can tolerate the lack of a professional review.

2. Criteria as questions

Now, what are the criteria to evaluate digital literature? This is probably one of the most exciting and difficult questions concerning digital literature, and there is simply no yellow brick road to follow. This is not about usability, this is not about ability to design. This is about aesthetical values of technical devices. Those devices are so different from program to program that one may object to constructing general theories about hyperliterature at all. (1) On the other hand, there are certain aspects one will find in most of digital literature: navigation, linkage, multimediality.

Maybe we can find some criteria to evaluate digital literature by listing the typical characteristics of it and raising the inherent questions. I see the following main issues:

1. Multimediality: How is the mutual impact of text, picture, and sound; what about the multimedial competence of the author?
2. Technical aesthetics: How is the relation between artistical and technical ingenuity; in other words, does the engineer beat the poet?
3. Performance: How and to what end is the reading process programmed (e.g., by setting time for the course of nodes)?
4. Links: Does the link transfer a specific meaning?
5. Navigation: Which meaning does the structure transfer, and which role does the reader play in putting together the segments of text?
6. Screen aesthetics: How is the screen used as a unit of representation?

3. Kitsch in digital literature

The jury of the German digital literature-competition claimed in 1996, among the digital literatures evaluated there was little sentimentality and kitsch but more joy of playing with the new technology. The addition was that sometimes this desire to play seemed to have displaced the search to articulate one's own experience. This leads to a main question of any aesthetics: what is kitsch and what is it supposed to be in terms of digital literature.

The question of kitsch opens a big can of worms, for here we might be well advised just to refer to a common definition of kitsch, which is based on aspects of encountering and using the aesthetical material. In this definition kitsch is understood as 1) the unreflected desire, without distance for contemplation, and 2) the oversimplified signification of an aesthetical means. (2)

Considering point 1 in terms of digital literature we have to admit that we find technophilia without distance of contemplation in many examples of digital

literature. I mean the use of technical devices without real meaning, e.g., a link which is just a link, but doesn't transfer any specific meaning, or a sophisticated animation effect which does not represent more than itself. Here the engineer has beaten the poet. We might call this the celebration of technology; it fits with what in terms of kitsch is called the unreflected desire.

It is reminiscent of the ornamentation, which kitsch has been doing to simple, functional goods since the late 19th century. Here, kitsch with a huge aesthetical effort pretends a special meaning where there is actually no special meaning. One can find this excessive use of aesthetical means of attraction in digital literature. Well, digital literature can be campy.

Considering point 2, we know that we can find a lot of oversimplified semantization of aesthetical or technical means. A link from the word emptiness to an empty white page might be one example.

4. Appropriate use of technical devices

There are two ways to produce kitsch in digital literature: either giving the aesthetical / technical mean no obvious meaning, or giving it a meaning which is too obvious. I will give two examples of an appropriate use of digital literature technology.

A

There is one node (number 047) in Stuart Moulthrop's digital literature Hegirascope which starts with the words "This is the dream of remote control. In this dream you can press a button whenever you like and totally reconceive the world around you. Click, you are two hundred feet tall looking down on sleeping suburbia […] " Having read approximately to this line, the node disappears, turns to a black screen with a single word in the middle – click. Of course, this is a false link. Nothing happens; one has to go back to finish reading the dream. One should hurry in doing this, since the screen will change again and again. So, the reader not only does not get the promised feeling of remote controls, rather he feels as though he himself is being controlled remotely.

This meaning of the link and the programmed time-effect complements, or to say more exactly, modifys the meaning of the letters. However, there is even more: browsing the black screen, the reader will encounter many hidden links. The occurrence of these links modifys the meaning once more and makes the technical device the major element of meaning.

B

A second example from one of the prizewinners of the 1998 German digital literature-competion is the following: In Jürgen Daiber's and Jochen Metzger's <u>Trost der Bilder</u> a man cut his artery and is watching his blood forming a pool on the carpet. The round image circling in the background of text is taken to be the pool of blood. When the phone rings, the man decides that if it rings ten times more he will answer it, finish the conversation quickly, and then call the emergency. It does. But the call is not what he expected. Nobody really cares for him. It's the pizza service having realized that the man had ordered pizza nine times they are offering the tenth pizza for free. As the reader realizes this turn of events, the round image has turned to a small one at the bottom of the text. It is a pizza, and it is set now behind the last word like a huge dot.

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These are some thoughts in approaching an aesthetics of digital literature from an academic perspective. The further discussion in this journal has, besides other questions, to ask:

- if the listed criterias meet the demands
- what further questions should be asked
- if kitsch in digital literature is to be defined in the way it is done here
- how the manner of writing and reading digital literature affects the reviewing of it.

Notes

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1. Espen J. Aarseth: Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1997, p. 79: "It is dangerous to construct general theories about hyperliterature. Instead we must look at each system as a potentially different technical medium, with aesthetically distinct consequences."

2. Ludwig Giesz: Phänomenologie des Kitsches, München 1960.