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New Perspectives on Digital Literature: Criticism and Analysis

By Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell

No. 37 – 2007

Dear Readers,

As announced by Roberto Simanowski in the previous issue (Simanowski 2006a: n.p.), and to some extent anticipated by some of its contributions (Simanowski 2006b, Raley 2006), this special issue of *dichtung-digital* aims to develop what is now called “second-wave” theory (Pang 1998, Ciccoricco 2007, Bell 2009a, 2009b forthcoming) in the field of digital literature. As opposed to the often over-generalised applications of poststructuralist theory, which dominated first-wave (hypertext and hypermedia) criticism, this latest school of criticism and analysis focuses on close readings and semiotic textuality, as well as the cross-currents between previously separate forms of entertainment (i.e. reading, watching and playing). In so doing, second-wave theory aims to contravene the characteristically negative, often condescending responses of mainstream literary academia to first-wave (hypertext and hypermedia) criticism. More generally, first-wave “analyses”, unsurprisingly, oftentimes result in technological pessimism vis à vis the alleged endangerment of the book. The lack of closure and, thus, suspense in non-linear and modular narratives, and the physical and mental “ordeal” and thus infeasibility of reading from a screen form strong areas of debate.

In addition to the critical theory, digital literature has also come a long way since the first attempts at creating “serious hypertext”. Marie-Laure Ryan’s (2000: n.p.) dictum, that ‘[t]he next generation of hypertexts will have to be visually pleasurable’, that ‘hypertext will be a work of design and orchestration as much as a work of writing’, and that, ‘[t]o remain readable, these conceptual hypertexts will have to be shorter than the hypertext novels of the first generation’ has meanwhile – consciously or not – been implemented by most leading New Media writers across the world.

Currently, one of the most significant and exciting tendencies within the realm of digital creativity has been the amalgamation of narrative and ludic elements. As in the case of the infinitely re-definable and thus controversial concept of the “cyborg” (hybrid creatures situated on a continuum between nature and technology), we are dealing with a spectrum of creative artefacts, which are located somewhere in-between the two poles of rule-based “game” and story-driven “narrative”. Likewise,

the concept of literary “textuality” has never been so open to multimodal, multilayered semiotic analysis, and the interpretive importance of visual (static and animated), auditive and haptic elements in text interaction cannot be emphasised strongly enough. After all, due to its underlying matrix – the binary digital code – digital textuality not only invites, it demands inclusive interpretation so as to make medium-specific semiotic interplay more than just the sum of its individual elements.

Acknowledging these theoretical and methodological developments, the authors of this special issue provide inspiring examples of how the ever-increasing range of creative genres within the aesthetic digital medium may be approached in a systematic, replicable and analytical manner. This is not least to demonstrate to the sceptics that still struggle to stop the Gutenberg Galaxy “bubble” from bursting that literary and aesthetic value more generally cannot be judged on a medial basis. Every “new” medium – and it is one of the defining features of “New Media” that they invite incessant and rapid innovation in textual interaction and representation – requires “new”, in the sense of “a wider range of”, analytical tools and methods. Similarly, as Matthew S.S. Johnson (this volume) argues in relation to the long-lived narratology/ludology debate, ‘not only is the debate weary, but [...] it has actually begun to stand in the way of valuable scholarship. Much of digital game studies research lacks the close-readings of specific games necessary to establish viable video game theory’. Hence, what twenty-first century, Web-2.0-generation “readers” – amateurs and professionals alike – need to develop in order to enable meaningful textual and interpersonal communication is a growing degree of ‘transliteracy’ (Transliterations Project, Thomas 2005); that is, the ability to decode, but also encode intra- and intermedially across modes and media genres, taking into account their specific characteristics as they impact on text production and reception/interaction.

That said, the motoric and strategic skills required for successful gaming introduce a yet unforeseen dimension to the discipline of close reading per se. In particular, they imbue hermeneutics with a much needed level of autophysiological awareness (Ensslin 2007 and 2009, forthcoming) and autonomous, playful proactivity required to respond to and successfully interact with unexpected twists and turns in the ‘text machine’ (Aarseth 1997). Crucially, these are only two examples of how the stylistic tool-kit may be expanded when close-reading games – some authors of this volume suggest going even further into the socio-economic apparatus surrounding individual games (series) to bring the hermeneutic circle up to date. Taking all the above observations into consideration, the eight contributions to this issue strike a thought-provoking balance between the two afore-mentioned poles of ludology and narrative, thus allowing for mutual approximation and, simultaneously, exemplifying the sheer variety of texts and critical approaches at hand.

The first four articles centre on digital artefacts that are closer to the narrative than the ludic pole. Firstly, set against the dominant of Anglophone writers living in the

First World, Thea Pitman explores the different perspectives that Latin American authors bring to the creation of hypertext and hypermedia works. Paying particular attention to the works of Doménico Chiappe and Blas Valdez, her article 'Hypertext in Context: Space and Time in Latin American Hypertext and Hypermedia Fictions' explores the spatial and temporal themes of their fiction, providing a second-wave analysis of two emerging canonical hypertext writers. In a pertinent conclusion, Pitman also questions the cultural implications of hypertext fiction for Latin American cultural identity and she asks whether the form is culturally liberating or whether it might actually perpetrate the ugly, but increasingly relentless globalisation of the Third World.

In 'Canons and Fanons: Literary Fanfiction Online', Bronwen Thomas further stretches the boundaries of the canon, investigating the relationship between fanfictions and the canonical texts on which they draw. In particular, Thomas examines the intertextual nature of fanfiction in relation to the 'fanon' – the range of texts which surround the source text and that might actually influence the source text itself. Thomas is concerned with the canonical status of texts which are adopted by fanfiction sites and shows that both classic and traditionally non-canonical texts make their way into the fanfiction canon. Perceiving this a postmodern inclination to mix high and low art, she also asks whether the proliferation of fanfiction might open up the canon to what are often seen as marginalised texts – whether this be women's writing, postcolonial texts or children's fiction.

In his paper, 'Internet Detectives: Performativity and Policing Authenticity on the Internet', Robin Stoa analyses an equally significant online community. Examining social networking websites by applying Judith Butler's (1999) theory of performativity, he bridges the gap between first and second wave approaches through the application of poststructuralist theory to a digital narrative. Paralleling Butler's assertion that the performance of gender is anticipated according to gender-from-biology preconceptions, Stoa argues that Internet identities can also be constructed by fulfilling audience expectations of online personae. Paying particular attention to the preservation of authenticity, Stoa shows the means by which sites are policed by their users. Ultimately, however, since online identities can never be truly verified, Stoa concludes that an ongoing dialogue of performance ensues in which varying degrees of authenticity emerge.

Finally, in 'Reading the Code between the Words: The Role of Translation in Young-hae Chang Heavy Industries's *Nippon*' Jessica Pressman analyses the integral ongoing dialogue between text and code in the work. Primarily, Pressman concludes that *Nippon* exhibits a self-reflexivity which is ultimately tied to its cultural and political contexts. In addition, however, in proving a structural, semiotic and hermeneutic analysis of the work, Pressman's sophisticated symbiosis also

epitomises the progression from first-wave theory to second-wave application at which this volume aims.

The other four contributions start from the opposite, ludic camp, focusing on various aspects of narrative in gaming. In his article, 'Combat to Conversation: Towards a Theoretical Foundation for the Study of Games', Matthew S. S. Johnson outlines and interrogates what he perceives as a 'turf war' within game theory. Arguing that game theory, which has so far maintained a focus on "theory" as opposed to "analysis", should now begin to close-read their objects of investigation, Johnson suggests that ludology should open up its barriers to literary and narratological approaches. Analysing a number of examples from *Indigo Prophecy* in order to understand reader immersion and narrative motivation in game play, Johnson demonstrates how picking indicative examples to support academic assertions, rather than finding counter-evidence to discredit innovation, is a much more profitable approach – both theoretically and analytically. In so doing, he aptly challenges the critical stalemate that he shows game theory as fostering.

Adopting Johnson's challenge and providing an entirely interdisciplinary approach, David Ciccoricco advocates utilising tools from beyond the traditional remits of ludology or narrative theory. In his article, "'Play, Memory": *Shadow of the Colossus* and Cognitive Workouts', Ciccoricco argues that relying on only one approach is inevitably inadequate for games in which both play and narrative are both central and inevitably connected. In addition, however, Ciccoricco also adopts research within cognitive science in order to consider the role of (procedural and episodic) memory in video game playing. Using *Shadow of the Colossus* as his case study, he analyses the player's engagement with and experience of the game and its projected fictional world from a somewhat unique cognitive perspective.

Focussing on the worldsapes of video games, Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler consider player agency – a concept that they suggest has, until now, been taken for granted by game theory. Analysing *Vampire: the Masquerade - Bloodlines* (*VtM*) they consider what they define as 'illusory agency' – the process by which readers are 'tricked' into believing they have authoritative agency within what is ultimately a pre-scripted experience. Crucial to their analysis is the game world itself, with its gothic inventory and associated motifs. Yet, as MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler show, the game world in *VtM* is a mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar, the expected and the unusual and it is this stimulating and enticing hybrid which continually frustrates the player's expectations and ultimately reminds them of their disempowered status.

In 'Claiming its Space' Michael Nitsche charts the historical development of machinima from its origins in the nineteen-eighties hacker scene to the sophisticated media amalgams of the present day. Paying particular attention to the use of intermedial elements, such as film, television, live event and theatre

performance, Nitsche shows that rather than a simple recording of onscreen play, much machinima actually exhibits extremely sophisticated narrative and dramaturgic devices. Accordingly, the genre requires equally sophisticated analytical tools to accompany it, not least because it inhabits a liminal space between creative gaming and cinematic animation.

Finally, let us draw your attention to an interesting yet editorially unsolvable matter: terminology. We would like to emphasise that individual authors use a variety of technical terms in conceptually different ways, with which we did not wish to interfere, not least because they are each based on a sound theoretical foundation. To give just one though crucial example, relating to games studies, a deliberate distinction between character and avatar is not always made. Whereas, in this issue, Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler maintain that '[a]gency first appears to manifest in the creation of an avatar, or character', Dave Ciccoricco uses 'the term "playable character" as opposed to "avatar" to reserve the latter, in line with its origins in role-playing games, for discussions of playable characters that are configurable to some degree by the user'. By distancing ourselves as editors from terminological prescriptivism we aim to open up a critical debate amongst our readers, which we see part of the further evolution of digital creativity as a fully recognised aesthetic discipline within academia.

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