sc4nda1 in New Media

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·· about the work

At heart any **scandal** is a story, or a thing of many stories; **sc4nda1** is even more peculiar, but also begins with a telling.

What you have before you started as an essay (or intent to rant) about an observation I kept reading in recent criticism, that electronic writing has not been properly dressed for the serious table. Where, the questions ran, are the publishers, the editors, the established and establishing critics? In a time of intense experiment and innovation, who says which textual deviations make real difference, and which are just bizarre? More ominously: where are the naive, casual readers, the seekers of pleasurable text who ought to move design's desire? To spin an old friend's epigraph, just who, exactly, finds this funhouse fun?

While there have been some strong attempts at answers, the issues remain largely unresolved. As a whole, electronic writing raises more questions than it answers. There seemed, I initially thought, something *scandalous* about the work I care about: an inherent slipperiness or resistance to specification; a tendency to chase technologies down untried channels of expression; a refusal, shared with many kinds of digital work, to conform to commercial or market-informed models of reception. The problem can be framed in terms of exchange. New media practices do not simply or adequately substitute for old. They give us what we never asked for, take us where we didn't know we wished to be.

Some of the questions that sprout in these strange, unsought destinations are simply categorical. For example: is hypertext fiction a kind of novel? Not in my view, though I respect differing opinions. Is born-digital writing part of literature? Interesting question. Since I don't want to answer that one, let's try another. The value of digital games as an expressive medium has just been recognized by U.S. courts. If games are thus legit, should we restrict them to the cultural kiddie pool, or other perceived shallows? Janet Murray memorably asks for better language, some term more just than "mere games." Perhaps, while we're at it, we also need new names for *literature* and *culture*.

About the time I thought these things, I began to dream about something called *post-seriousness*.

Dreams can be seriously disturbing. Listen to your brain some slow-waking morning as it drums out skeins of raw association, hovering in tumbling columns of benthic language, calling names that might belong to ancient college bands, lost dotcoms, or forgotten devils. *The merchants of hominy. Bitumen from reefs of space. Return chairs to the brave dog for assured critique of hair.* And of course: *Center for post-serious studies.*

Happily, I can still recognize a symptom when I say one.

Symptom of error at least, if nothing worse: I had the language wrong. In drifting toward the post-serious, and specifically, in thinking about *scandal* in new media, I began to re-play overspliced and time-worn tapes, coming back with late retort to arguments ruled moot many years back. In other words, *scandal* is the wrong word, largely because it implies someone capable of enough shock and prurient investment to be *scandalized*. If any in the audience still match that description, they're probably my age. We need to be younger than that now.

On the subject of words-between-the-lines-of-age, I recall something a senior colleague said many years ago, speaking patiently to the academic rookie I then was. I had just told her about *hypertext*, this marvelous new thing I had found, and what it might imply for writing. She replied: "Ah, but now you will have to create a new language."

My colleague was right, of course. These days you should always change your language every six months or three thousand revolutions, whichever comes first. So I have dropped *scandal* from my wordlist in favor of the more appropriate **sc4nda1**, a string produced not so much through troplogy or erasure, but bitwise transformation. Like other key terms -- e.g., the Tetragrammaton, or the equally numinous *http://* -- **sc4nda1** is properly unutterable, or at least unpronounceable; though borrowing from from someone who proposed to voice *http://* as *hoopla*, you can always say *thingy* if need arises.

What does it mean, this new term of art? My best reply to that question is the present work, with which you might play along; but I will venture that **sc4nda1** is less a matter to be propositionally defined, than an occasion for differentiating practice.

That is, when I made the pivot from *scandal* to **sc4nda1**, it became clear the work in question needed something other than the standard form of writing. This is partly because it is meant for people whose literacy practices involve manual operations other than flipping pages or clicking hypertext links. Also, I am trying to frame an argument that is as much *in* new media -- or the domain of the Universal Turing Machine -- as it may be from anywhere else.

And so to the thing itself: probably more exploration than investigation, though who knows what offenses may come to light. You may find it (inevitably) a post-serious entertainment for hand, eye, ear, and brain, other organs optional. If the thingy deserves a generic name, try **arcade essay**, a cross between philosophical investigation (well okay, rant) and primal video game. Duly object-oriented, the work no doubt inherits bad attributes from both parent classes, but hopefully some virtues as well. There is one sure way to find out.

···into the game

There are two modes, gameplay and reading; reach the latter through the former, and vice versa.

Play

Though I have taken large liberties, the game will be familiar to anyone of a certain age, and should be easy enough for beginners. The left-side paddle is yours, operated by the mouse or other pointing device. Unlike in the original, you score simply by returning the ball, with no need to defeat the opponent, who cannot miss. If you fail a level, it will automatically repeat.

If you've had enough, close window or browser altogether. Navigate elsewhere. Read a book! However, do not expect to reach more of the reading phase here (assuming you want) without playing the game.

As you play, especially on more advanced levels, certain distracting or annoying things may happen on the screen, sometimes involving text of dubious value. These are not necessarily malfunctions.

Reading

Text in the reading phase is animated and evanescent. That's a technical description, not a stylistic claim. Writing streams in, one character at a time, hangs around for some seconds, then melts to nonsense in the heat of your gaze.

Clicking at any point left of the midline of your screen will cause the program to re-stream either the current passage, if it has not yet completed its appearance, or the previous passage, if the stream is complete. You may use this option to recover a text that has changed beyond recognition. The recovery option is not available when your screen says "LEVEL UP."

Clicking to the right of the midline advances to the next passage, or eventually the next game level.

Various noises and voices may hector you as the text rolls in. Best not to respond.

· · · technicalities

With apologies to the audibly challenged (a class I seem to be joining), this project includes sound elements, so speakers or headphones are suggested; though the work is no less (or more) intelligible in silence.

I built the project originally using Asynchronous Javascript And XML (AJAX), with a bit of HTML 5 for audio. However -- to my enormous irritation -- browser support for these technologies is limited and unreliable at this writing (Q411).

I thereore re-engineered the entire system using Adobe Flash and Actionscript, and that is the only version now available. A reasonably recent version of the Adobe Flash plug-in is required. Version 11 is current at this writing.

Because the project uses only words, simple graphics, and brief sounds, it does not require heavy bandwidth; however, performance may degrade on older or less powerful systems. At this point the project is not accessible on Apple's iOS, and I have not tested on Android.

B E G I N

(On return visits to this page, click the title image to start the first level.)