

Anja Rau

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Web/Fiction/Design: A brief beta-test of this year's winner of the ELO Awards, Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves of Girls*

By Anja Rau

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Abstract

A (literature) award usually comes with publicity as well as responsibility. As this year's ambassador of digital literature the US-american Electronic Literature Organization chose a webfiction that does not meet the technological standards of current internet or CD-ROM productions. Neither the rather outdated technique of frames, nor Flash (a program for moving images), nor the embedding of sounds have been implemented in a way that is technologically useful (there's nor debating aesthetics) or at least more or less correct. About 15 years after the "invention" of digital literature (this date, too, is open for discussion), the technology available has become so sophisticated that a single author obviously can no longer live up to the demands as a lonely creative genius. The quality even of praised digital literature seems to indicate that, caused by the raising of technical standards, the future lies in what collaborative writing in hypertext or online "Mitschreibeprojekte" did not manage to establish: the dismissal of authorship in the traditional sense of authority over the text in favor of a plural, diverse team-work.

1. Awards and Awareness

The winner of this year's ELO (Electronic Literature Organization) Award for fiction is Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves of Girls*. To be the first recipient of a prize that is set up to become an annual event is quite prestigious: On the one hand, *Waves* marks (at least in the eyes of ELO representatives) the highpoint of over 15 years of digital fiction. On the other hand, the winner-text will act as a trendsetter which not only future submissions to the ELO awards will be measured up against and turn to for inspiration. And finally, an award means publicity for the author as well as for the genre. Media coverage will draw especially first-time readers to electronic literature who may be more willing to sample something new if it has some sort of seal of

approval. This is indeed a desired effect as digital fiction is by no means a best-seller and the increased publicity that comes in the wake of an awards ceremony will very probably have an influence on how the genre is received in the near future. But on the whole, the texts have to speak for themselves: They have to be up to date literarily, technologically and ergonomically; they have to engage the reader and display a quality that matches that of popular and professional web and/or CD-ROM design today.

This responsibility is reflected in the judging criteria for this year's award:

- Innovative use of electronic techniques and enhancements.
- Literary quality, understood as being related to print and electronic traditions of fiction and poetry, respectively.
- Quality and accessibility of interface design.

It is surprising that the text that best fulfils these requirements should be *These Waves of Girls* with its reliance on three or four years-old technology (which can hardly be read as a design-statement) and an outdated topic the treatment of which utterly ignores its predecessors in both print and the digital medium.

From the start, *Waves* appears to be buggy. Neither the oldfashioned frames nor the currently rather popular Flash have been implemented correctly (let alone meaningfully). Instead, the text raises plug-in barriers and risks losing its reader as early as the splash-screen. I have tested *Waves* with Netscape 4.7 and 6 as well as IE 5 and 5.5 for both PC and Mac. The test was conducted on a DSL connection that downloads 1 MB in less than a minute. Loading times for *Waves* were determined with the help of the indicator in the Netscape 6 status bar. The bugs remained more or less the same across the platforms: the most annoying issues are the loading-times, the faulty use of frames and Flash and the inclusion of sounds. Without knowing the webstatistics for < <http://www.yorku.ca/caitlin/waves> > I would reckon that about 15% of visitors leave the site at the splash-page, about another 50% will probably quit before the first content-page has finished loading.

2. Bug-Report

According to Netscape 6, the title-page of *Waves* takes 15 seconds to load the title-image and, after a non-clickable redirect, another 6 seconds until the main navigation appears. The start-page of the first chapter takes another 21 seconds. In order to get a separate value for "Vanessa", I opened this link in a new window – it arrived in just under a minute. More than 1.5 minute before the first content appears on the screen – the average surfer will disappear into the web in a third of this time

– and be it only because most readers still pay for webfiction by the minute or by the megabyte and thus are unwilling to accept long or heavy downloads.

Waves uses frames to be able to load different textblocks into a static background and navigation within one chapter. This could be a means of optimizing loading times – but in this case it might have been better to optimize the images themselves first or even to reconsider the visual overkill. And anyway, with the advent of more sophisticated technologies, frames have gone out of fashion – not last because of the ugly borders and scrollbars they often produce. Now, a visible border may be a sense-bearing element, symbolizing a clash or rupture, for example, but I cannot see such a usage in *Waves*. Considering the range of alternatives, one cannot help but suspect that frames have been chosen not as the most useful but as the simplest solution to the problem of changing contents on a static background. More is the pity that the author does not seem to have a grasp on the technology of her choice: The tags that suppress the borders are not always set correctly so that sometimes there are borders, sometimes not. Nor should a release-tested website contain the sort of linking errors Roberto Simanowski traces in his article in *dichtung-digital* that load entire framesets into the referring frame.

Even the idea of loading background images around the central text-frame has not been thought through: The sizes of the background images do not match the sizes of the frames – they cannot do so because the site does not have a fixed size so that the frames can be stretched according to the reader's whim (or the monitor resolution). Roberto Simanowski reads the resulting tiling-effects as intentional, but in most cases they look more like defects. The worst example is certainly [kissing girls > Vanessa > way](#), where the mainframe loads an animated GIF into the background which then tiles, and on top of this 9 sound-files which have been embedded with visible players. While the aniGifs play and the sounds load, the page flickers hectically – as if one was looking at the hamsterdance on a monitor that needs calibrating. It is hard to find (web)aesthetic reasons for employing visuals like that.

Flash is a popular tool for displaying moving images on the web: Its basic functions are easy to use and thanks to pre- and postloading, relatively large animations can be displayed without streaming and without requiring a broadband connection. *Waves* uses Flash for the splashscreen, for the main navigation and for visual effects within the text. Unfortunately, the author ignores the fact that flash was designed to manipulate vectorgraphics: Fisher animates alienated photographs. This makes the images unnecessarily large and loading times unbearable. There are situations where using Flash would make a lot of sense for *Waves* (see below) but where the author opted for other solutions. Consequently, one gets the impression that whenever Flash is used, it is being used for its own sake, as a technical gimmick (and not very convincingly, either).

As a multimedial text, *Waves* uses not only animated images but sounds as well. In some places, WAV files are used as soundcarpeting, but the text also offers the reader the possibility to listen to the author reading out certain nodes. At least there is no looping music ... Unfortunately, the sounds are not very reliable: For example, I have not been able to hear the girls' laughter that accompanies the splash-screen on all tested platforms and then sometimes only on the first loading of the page. In other places, the sound-files are embedded with a visible player that crashes the layout. It is especially annoying that sounds are sometimes preloaded into a page that does not play them itself but links on to another page from where the sounds can be started manually. The sounds thus used do not even appear to be sense-bearing elements of the text, either. An important and well-documented issue of hypertext theory as well as women's writing is the clash of orality and literacy. But despite its heavy usage of sounds, *Waves* remains oblivious of this topic and tradition. The sound elements remain on a level of techno gadgetry and, due to their faulty implementation, appear to be mainly superfluous.

In short, *Waves* contains a lot of sloppy programming. Not only do frame-borders that appear despite the author's attempts to suppress them. Only few of the individual pages have titles. Most pages contain an "untitled document" title-tag which looks as if the site had been created with the help of a generator; then the generator-information must have been deleted without taking the trouble to rename the documents. Often, the font color of the navigation does not contrast well with the background images and becomes illegible – although the text does not seem to purposefully disable visited links on a regular basis. It is hard to read the design faults as intentional: as critique, irony or fashionable trash-style. I don't like to make comparisons between print and digital culture that establish the book as the rule digital media are measured up against. Still, print-publishers usually take care to have their texts spellchecked, the pages cut, the binding in order. Why does allegedly excellent digital literature subject the reader to buggy code? What is the idea of technical as well as artistic quality behind such texts? If those who claim to care most about digital literature, authors and members of award-giving organizations, offer buggy texts as the best they can do, how do they hope to convince a yet to be won readership?

3. Debugging

The above issues are critical. We cannot expect that a surfer who is willing to engage with a literary text for what may be the first time is equally willing to cast aside her learnt online-behavior and what she has come to perceive as high-quality webdesign and a common degree of usability. In addition, a genre cannot expect to

be taken seriously if its best representative far from masters even the basics of its art. I say basics because none of the bugs outlined above are hard to fix – for one who knows what she is doing.

We do not expect a book to come with a manual. Print is a "transparent" medium, there is no friction when we read it and we do not have to reflect on its properties. The computer is different. Reading on a screen and with the help of an input-device is new – and the existence and readability of the text depends very tangibly on the properties of the carrier. It is not a question of politeness to supply a startup-page that explains which browsers should be used for best performance, which plugins are necessary and whether the site requires a broadband-connection – not a splash that automatically redirects to the main navigation and excludes those who do not meet the silent requirements. A redirect should at least have a switch that checks the system and, if necessary, directs the reader to a page that explains what happened and what the reader might do to be able to see the "real" text after all.

The windows should come with a fixed size – this can prevent uncontrollable tiling of the background images or allow tiling only when it is a desired and meaning-bearing effect. Frames should be avoided (or else the border-tags should be double-checked). *Waves* uses frames only to refresh content in a static context – PHP might be the better choice. And if the content cannot be broken down into screen-sized bits, a little JavaScript can create a scrolling function that does not look like my first homepage anno 1997.

Unlike an information- or transaction-centered site, a webfiction can afford to rely on Flash for its central navigation – an alternative no-flash-site makes little sense for a text like *Waves* that includes interactive images (although one might question the aesthetic quality of the images used here as well as the contribution they make to the text). Especially concerning the sound-problems, Flash might have been a good choice as well: Using a 1-pixel transparent or background-colored Flash, sound can be easily preloaded into a site and then played. – After all, why not create the entire site in Flash? An intermediate-level Flash-programmer could easily realize *Waves* in a way that avoids the pitfalls of background-images, sound and loading-times.

4. The (Hyper)Literary Tradition

Finally, have a look at the (hyper-)literary quality of the winner of the ELO-award. Indeed, the reasons the final judge for fiction, Larry McCaffery, gives for his decision are mainly based on content and aesthetics:

"I was consciously seeking out fiction that somehow managed to grab my attention and kept it, that amazed or amused or bewildered or disturbed me, and above all that moved me in some way. ... I found myself hooked on *Waves* from the moment I first logged on and watched [the] gorgeous graphic interface [...]."

Waves is – and McCaffery makes this quite clear in his comments – an associative hyperfiction. But to use a hypertextual structure for an associative text is neither innovative (because it suggests itself) nor particularly new – even if an associative text may be easier to approach by a newcomer than, say, an adaptive or even a "robotic" hypertext. One might say that, if nothing else, *Waves* at least caters to an audience of first-time readers who can be attracted by an award. The tradition of "electronic fiction", however, is merely taken into account in an act of *imitatio veteris* – if at all.

Sadly, the sujet falls through as well: Lesbian confessions, accounts of a search for identity with a little consciousness raising thrown in, had their heyday in the first half of the 1990s, the tradition within women's writing goes back as far as the 1970s. In addition, it is not only the salesman-episode that reminds one too much of Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* – merely turning the Canadian life into a lesbian one does not constitute an innovative approach to an established genre. However, hypertext is very well suited for the structural encoding of the tensions between dominant and marginal cultures, a tension that is typical of fictional and real biographies of young lesbians in the late 20th century. Similarly, the compulsion to adopt a unified identity and a linear story of one's life that came and still comes with coming out, might be represented in a text with a hypertextual layout. *Waves* is obviously not aware of such possibilities – let alone of the tradition of homoerotic and especially lesbian (sub)texts in hyperfiction from *Victory Garden* via *Patchwork Girl* to *Desert Mauve*.

5. From Work to Team-Work

Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves of Girls* seems to make a case for the old prejudice that only those texts go online that did not find a publisher in the offline world. Especially in the context of the ELO Award and the ambassador-function of an award-winning text, this is more than just a pity. If this is the best we can do, digital literature will not get out of its niche in the near future – quite contrarily we can expect that intelligent computer games which are currently coming of age with their target group will carry the development of digital literature past that which we currently understand by the term. Unlike hyperfiction, computer games have an audience and thus a market. – The financial / commercial aspect of the market

ought not to be underestimated. In the case of digital texts, the crucial question is not merely if an author can live by her writing. The equipment necessary for creating a multimedial text is expensive and quickly outdated. We need to find ways of financing digital art that meets the standard of commercial digital products.

Digital literature cannot afford to ignore current standards of web- and CD-ROM-design – catering to four or five different platforms alone requires nontrivial skills and experience. Like the choice of materials in sculpture, for example, the choice of technologies in the digital world has to be a conscious decision – and it has far greater consequences than a preference for pencils, fountain pens or a qwertz-keyboard. Broadband, minimal design, retro-look – there are countless equivalent design- and technological options but even HTML 2.0 code has to be free of errors, each JPG in an online-text has to be web-optimized. Unlike writing, painting or sculpting, a multimedia-project requires proficiency in many different disciplines at the same time: Text, image, sound and programming. If an author opts for the digital medium, she has to meet this challenge.

But can failure in the face of sophisticated technology be blamed on an author like Caitlin Fisher, who grew up in the world of print and now turns to the computer as an exciting new writing environment? The time of hand-hacked websites is over. Modern, commercial websites get built by teams of five or more specialists, often in several months of hard work. Individual authors can hardly live up to the standards thus established – and this means we have to say good-bye to our 200-years-old concept of the creative genius.

It seems to have gone out of fashion to talk, as early hypertext theory often did quite euphorically, about the disappearance of the author as authority from the digital text. Cryptic, inaccessible hyperfictions strengthened rather than deconstructed the author's position of dominance over text and reader alike and collaborative writing projects on the internet, the next big thing of a couple of years ago, are now being widely regarded as failures. We want to read texts by authors (and gaze at paintings by painters) who know what they are doing and have time and experience to pour into their works. Whether we encounter the result of their endeavours as closed and ex cathedra or whether the author has opened her work to a worldview shaped by plurality and diversity is another story. And finally, whoever tries to live by their writing, can hardly do without our still valid concepts of authorship and copyright.

It is nonetheless likely that a project that has been realized by more than one author will reflect as openness and multivocality the presence of the different cultures, socializations and convictions that the contributors brought into their joint work. Digital literature or pieces of multimedia art that have been created by teams of specialists and are presented as such can contribute to the much-discussed demise of our traditional understanding of authorship. A side-effect would be an increase in the technological quality of digital literature / art. "Art with an attitude"

could compete with the sort of product with which mainstream-oriented entertainment-multis flood the internet. Even the poet behind her mechanical typewriter needs a certain financial success in order to survive – it's even more important in a high-priced multimedia environment. Any artist has to face the sell-out question in the face of sponsors, awards and publishers' programs no matter which medium she works in. And after all, today's return of interest-driven multimedia culture can only benefit when a couple of literary people join the global players in the ring.