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Four Statements on Digital Literature

No. 38 – 2008

Abstract

All participants were asked for a statement about exciting and bothering aspects of digital literature and to name their favorite piece of digital literature and non-digital art. They were encouraged not to think too long and to be poignant and radical with their answers.

1. This aspect of digital literature excites me most.
2. This aspect of digital literature bothers me most.
3. My favorite work of digital literature.
4. My favorite work of non-digital art:

Speakers

Chris Funkhouser (NJIT)

Peter Gendolla (University of Siegen)

Katherine Hayles (UCLA)

Fotis Jannidis (University of Darmstadt)

Rita Raley (UC Santa Barbara)

Francisco Ricardo (Boston University)

Jörgen Schäfer (University of Siegen)

Thomas Swiss (University of Minnesota)

Mark Tribe (Brown University)

Karin Wenz (University of Maastricht)

Panelists

Jeremy Askenas (Brown University)

Daniel Howe (NYU)

Aya Karpinska (Brown University)

Justin Katko (Brown University)

Patricia Tomaszek (University of Siegen)

Moderators

John Cayley (Brown University)

George Fifield (DeCordova Museum)

Thomas Kniesche (Brown University)

Francisco Ricardo (Boston University)

Roberto Simanowski (Brown University)

Jeremy Ashkenas

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
The ability to publish and distribute otherwise unprintable writing. The emergence of new rhetorical forms.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
That a large amount of it is concerned with reacting to Critical Theory, as opposed to communicating a message of its own.

John Cayley

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
Many aspects of digital literature excite me: the programmability of the sign itself; the recovery of time for literary art; writing that is, itself, time-based art; the discovery of complex surfaces for writing as inscription, writing in literal space and time; literal art.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
That literary values and strategies of signification may be overwhelmed by those of other media (typically audiovisual media) before artists have

been made to fully realise - in the context of digital media - that poetics is the art of the symbolic and that other media are also subject to this fundamentally literary practice.

- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
n-Cha(n)t by David Rokeby (and his *The Giver of Names*); Brian Kim Stefans *Dreamlife of Letters, Listening Post,*
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Too many of these (here follows an arbitrary scatter-shot): poetry/poetic prose: Mac Low, Retallack, Bergvall, Pastior, Mathews, Kafka Art: Beuys, Matisse, Horn, Turrell ... fluxus, language, and poetical formalism.

George Fifield

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
The aspect of digital literature and digital art in general that excites me is the growing sophistication of the interactivity involved. Not all digital literature is interactive and not all interactive literature is digital. But interactive digital literature, shorn of the adornments of multimedia, has been quite adept at getting closer to the promise that the reader's own subtleties of personality have a direct effect on the art.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
It's still on the computer. Not that I'm a luddite, by any means, but I would rather read a book in hand than on a computer. I just don't like the screen for text. The Sony reader with its E Ink technology seems to be headed in the right direction, but it doesn't appear to be programmable, so it isn't as yet usable for digital literature.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Galatea by Emily Short
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
This is an impossible question as my taste in both literature and the visual arts is wide ranging and inclusive. But here are a few works of non-digital interactive art that have given me pleasure. Felix Gonzales-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* 1991; Alfredo Jaar *Playground*, 1999, multiple works by Yoko Ono and the traveling exhibition *do it*, organized by Christian Boltanski, Bertrand Lavier and Hans-Ulrich Obrist.

Chris Funkhouser

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
Outrageous cybertextual intertextuality in all media

- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
Laziness in performance and preparation of works; didactic poeticians
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Visual poem/collages by K.S. Ernst and Amy Hufnagel, *International Dictionary of Neologisms, Arteroids, Intergrams, V: Vniverse, The Speaking Clock*
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Ben Polsky's hand-wrought emanations of Newark in decay (see <http://benholli.com/sitesurveyindex.htm>); Nathaniel Mackey's writing (in all forms), Cecil Taylor on piano

Peter Gendolla

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
Once upon a time literature was a forum to reflect, discuss or review the effects on the human body of what McLuhan has called extensions of men, media for instance. In the digital age the extensions are returning into the body, literally, as reintegration of bio-electronic media into the perception- or neuronal-systems of the human body. And again, digital literature is reflecting the consequences of this process...
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
The claptrap, razzle-dazzle of some projects.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Until now: none. Nearing to a favorite one: Wardrip-Fruin's *Screen*.
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Cervantes' *Don Quichote*

Katherine Hayles

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
The challenge electronic literature presents to reading, writing, and understanding textuality; the ability of electronic literature to explore time-based production while still maintaining the semantic vocation of text; the fusion of human and machine cognition that inheres in the writing, storage, transmission and reading of electronic texts.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
Its always-looming obsolescence and ephemerality; its lack of universal access; its dependence on monopolistic proprietary software.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
John Cayley's *Impositions*, Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin's *Listening*

Post, Stephanie Strickland and Cynthia Jaramillo's *slippingglimpse*, M. D. Coverley's *Egypt: The Book of Coming Forth By Day*.

- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker*, Steve McCaffrey's *Carnival*, William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*.

Daniel Howe

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
When computation engages deeply with language at multiple (transparent) layers within a work; when the 'writing process' can be augmented via digital/procedural processes; when approaches to literary production leverage principles of emergent systems, when surprise happens.

Fotis Jannidis

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
The seamless merging of different media + the interactivity.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
It is getting old so fast. I cannot imagine reading a contemporary piece of hyperfiction or playing a modern computer game in 50 years. Probably we will only have movies of what is now an immersive interactive experience.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Deus Ex.
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Mmh - In arts I am not a monogamist. Even on the smallest bookshelf you can have *Buddenbrooks* next to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* next to *V.*, *Hyperion* and *Wallenstein* on the top and the *Glass Key* and *L.A. Confidential* crammed into the back, some poems rolled up too. Looking around you would see a Magritte, a Liebermann, 1,2,3 Max Ernsts and probably more. And if film is still a non-digital art ...

Aya Natalia Karpinska

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
Doing strange things with text.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
Forcing our audience to sit hunched in front of a computer screen,

alone, struggling to figure out a new interface. Almost every work invents a slightly new interface!

- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Paul Notzold, *TXtual Healing*, Y-H Chang Heavy Industries *The Struggle Continues*
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Kandinsky *Several Circles*, Stravinsky *Firebird*

Justin Katko

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
The ability to feed the work's web-traffic into the work itself, not interactivity but feedback channels established to generate minimal units of response.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
The dual emphases on interactivity and visuality. The first tends to aggrandize its representation of democracy as a materialization of such, and the second (as far as poetry is concerned) tends to drown out the music that makes language lyrical.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Andrea Brady's *Wildfire*, UBERMORGEN.COM's *Google Will Eat Itself*
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926; film), Guy Debord's *Hurllements en faveur de Sade* (1952; film)

Thomas Kniesche

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
The fact that literature is no longer bound to the twenty-something letters of the alphabet. By incorporating other media, entire realms of expression are opened up to literature. "Reading" is no longer what it used to be, a basically imaginary or hallucinatory activity that has always been the entertainment of a privileged elite.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
The fact that literature is no longer bound to the twenty-something letters of the alphabet. The incredibly complex activity known as "reading" might suffer from the encroachment of other media into literature.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
I don't have one but I am very interested in digital mystery texts, such as *Spaetwinterhiteze*.

- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship* and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

Rita Raley

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
the surprise; wonder; the synthesis of text, image, sound, performance into a 'total work of art'; waiting for such a synthesis
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
platform & browser issues
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**

Work	Innovation	Technique
Young-Hae Chang, various	A-	B+
John Cayley, <i>Overboard</i> and <i>Translation</i>	A/A-	A
Olia Lialina, <i>My Boyfriend Came Back From the War</i>	B+	A
Ted Warnell, <i>Poems by Nari</i> (various)	B+/B	A
Dan Waber: <i>Strings</i>	B+	A-/B+
Talan Memmott: <i>Lexia to Perplexia</i>	A-/B+	A
Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin: <i>Listening Post</i>	A/A-	A

- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Lately I find myself thinking about *Cloud Atlas*; *Atonement*; *Never Let Me Go*; *Waterland*; *The Sea*; William Trevor's stories. *Now*; *Voyager* will, I suspect, always console and disturb.

Francisco Ricardo

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
For me this points directly to its future, to the possibility of its malleable evolution into an experience so entirely autonomous that "literature" ceases to be the more or less conventionally associative term for it. In but a few decades, we have already witnessed variants on the emergence of a forking path narrative, and of late, the word has begun to converge with nontextual media. One aspect of the work that will not disappear is its principal association with "literacy" (as opposed to theatre, orality, or other expressive modes), but this constant supports a world of

such numerous contextualizations -- temporality-morphing, character-morphing, plot-morphing, to name a few, that the notion of story is itself eidetically enhanced up toward something that it has never before assumed. Adding to this mix the final appearance of distributed or social authoring promises to yield up new authorial practices and productions whose motivations will probably be tied to empirical acts (e.g., sports, social enactments) and enable this art form to transcend others both in reflective and participatory power simultaneously.

- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
Literature in any form is a historically determined phenomenon, gaining in impact and depth with the passing of time. In fact the story is the "content form" of literature, and it stands in a diametrically different kind of temporal relation with the present than "media", which is to say the "vehicle forms" of literature. These are always of the moment, and therefore progress only by obsolescing each other. The presence of both content and media in a single creative platform obviously speaks to a need for a tenuous creative balance that has not always been properly maintained. When the ground of literature is made subservient to the dynamism of any media through which it is experienced, the former suffers from the same eventual obsolescence as the latter. Obsolescence, a criterion of media, ought never to apply to a literary work; it never did before.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Perhaps my preferred work is itself a study of the genre itself. Raine Koskimaa's *Digital Literature: From Text to Hypertext and Beyond* is the crispest prolegomenon to a theoretical appreciation of every other work of digital literature that I have encountered.
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
The entire oeuvre of Andrew Neumann.

Jörgen Schäfer

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
In the Gutenberg era, literature has always been a (highly abstract) medium of identifying and working through the effects of socio-cultural change. I am interested in how literature can retain this quality in a digital media environment.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
I am rather bothered by the ignorance of many scholars and readers who tend to compare every piece of digital literature they come across with classical masterpieces.

- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Noah Wardrip-Fruin: *Screen*, Jean-Luc Lamarque: *Pianographique*, Michael Mateas & Andrew Stern: *Façade*.
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
What a difficult question! Well, let's try: My favorite books are Elias Canetti's autobiography in 3 volumes, Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Grass' *The Tin Drum*, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann's poetry and Christoph Hein's novels. I admire the performances of German comedian Gerhard Polt. My favorite movies are *Magnolia*, *Babel* and *The Life of Brian*, and my favorite pop album is Radiohead's *Kid A*. As regards visual arts, I am interested in Dada, Pop Art and contemporary photography.

Roberto Simanowski

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
The migration of words into foreign environments to experiment with multi-layered, inter- and trans-medial ways of expression as seen in the past in concrete poetry and painting with letters.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
The hostility of those foreign environments to the linguistic expression of meaning. Digital technology tends to cannibalize language turning it into visual or sonic objects, performance, or sculpture. It does so to overcome the authority of the word rather than to inherit the qualities of the 'slaughtered'. The reason may be jealousy or subconscious love. However, the result is often de-semantisation and a multi-medial pidgin.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Listening Post is a fascinating and conceptually complex work at the border of literature and sculpture or installation. I like *YATOO* by Zeigenossen and Olia Lialina's *My Boyfriend Came Home from the War*.
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Verlázquez' *Las Meninas*, *Dirty White Trash (with Gulls)* by Tim Noble and Sue Webster, and Heinrich Heine.

Thomas Swiss

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
Work done by multiple artists from multiple "disciplines". And: Bi- or trilingual works.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries and many others.

- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
At the moment? Well, even printed books are digital (composed digitally, printed the same) these days, so I'll note some influential songs/bands: Joy Division, The Handsome Family, Animal Collective, Beck.

Patricia Tomaszek

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
I like the way how texts become more visual, the interplay of texts, fonts, colors, moves, multi-medial devices and the presentation on screens excites me a lot! Programming texts in a special way can enhance the meaning of a text.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
The lack of literature!
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Noah Wardrip-Fruin's *Screen*, Olia Lialina's *My Boyfriend Came Home from the War*, works by Robert Kendall.
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Poems by Robert Creeley; Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*; Georg Weber's *With time life passes more quickly* (Piano); Hermann Hesse's *Demian*; Jonathan Safran-Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*; Peter Handke's *Selbstbezeichnung*. Movie: *The Life Of Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck)

Mark Tribe

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
The Internet's ability to bring esoteric works of art (digital literature included) to large and sometimes diverse audiences never ceases to impress me.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
It bothers me when cool technology is used to prop up weak writing.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Rob Wittig: The Fall of the Site of *Marsha* (1999).
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Yoko Ono: *Map Piece* (1964).

Karin Wenz

- **This aspect of digital literature excites me most:**
Most exciting for me is the continuation of concepts coming from Fluxus, Dadaism, Concrete Poetry but also from programming languages being realized in new interactive environments.
- **This aspect of digital literature bothers me most:**
The loss of concepts in favor of performances, which connect easily to remix cultures but end up in a spectacle, losing depth and coherence.
- **My favorite work of digital literature:**
Interpoesia by Azevedo and Menenez, *Listening Post* by Hansen and Rubin, *Paranoid Panopticum* by Maat.
- **My favorite work of non-digital art:**
Literature: Italo Calvino, Arundhati Roy, Haruki Murakami. Film: Akira Kurosawa, Takeshi Kitano