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Is There a Place for Digital Literature in the Information Society?

By Raine Koskimaa

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Abstract

Finland and other Nordic countries in many ways belong to the forerunners in the development of the so-called information society. For the time being, the level of development towards the information society has mainly been measured by technological and infrastructural qualities - the amount of computers available, the coverage of wide band connections etc. It looks like the substance side of the equation has been largely forgotten. Information still is, to a large extent, published and distributed as books. Libraries, as well organized archives of literature with well educated personnel, can be even seen as one of the corner stones of the information society. Especially so in the Nordic countries, where the public library system has traditionally been widely acknowledged and respected. Currently, there is a serious discussion going on about the future role, strategies, and foci of public libraries: should they stick to their traditional role, or should they remodel their services toward portal-like gateways to virtual archives.

One more characteristic of Nordic culture should be mentioned here, which is the high appreciation of literary knowledge, accompanied with literacy rates reaching towards 100 percent. All this put together creates an interesting test bed for the case of digital literature. The infrastructure is there, the literary culture and literacy is there, and public access to literature, both print and digital, is well organized. Only one thing lacks, which is the digital literature itself. The central question in this paper is, why is it so – does the (almost) non-existence of digital literature in countries where the circumstances seem to be as close to the ideal as one can imagine seriously undermine the belief in the digital literature in general? Or is it rather, that too strong a literary culture is foremost an obstacle for the development of digital literature?

I will take a closer look at projects carried on in Finland, in order to promote digital literature (such as lending ebook devices out from public libraries; providing pupils with 'e-bags', publishing national bestsellers in ebook format, establishing literary fora in the Internet, etc.), and seek out what has been learned from these experiments. Also, I will take a look at similar projects in Sweden, Denmark and Norway, which all share, by and large, the same qualities of well-developed information society and strong belief in literary knowledge. Through this survey I'll

try to find some tentative answers to the questions if there is, indeed, a place for literature in the information society, and if there is, where is it, and how would that literature look like.

Finland and other Nordic countries in many ways belong to the forerunners in the development of the so-called information society (for example, in 1996, according to a survey by IDC, the top five in Information Imperative Index were USA, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland). For the time being, the phase of development towards the information society has mainly been measured by technological and infrastructural qualities – the amount of computers available, the coverage of wide band connections etc. It looks like the substance side of the equation has been largely forgotten. Information still is, to a large extent, published and distributed also as books. Libraries, as well organized archives of literature with well-educated personnel, can even be seen as one of the corner stones of the information society. "In the information society development libraries are central, as they are open-for-all access points for printed, and increasingly, electronic materials." (Lintilä & Savolainen & Vuorensyrjä 2001, 50). Especially so in the Nordic countries where the public library system has traditionally been widely acknowledged and respected. Currently there is a serious discussion going on about the future role, strategies, and foci of public libraries: should they stick to their traditional role, or should they remodel their services toward portal-like gateways to virtual archives. Whatever the future path will be, they have been quick to react to the current challenge: just in a couple of years, the amount of libraries with Internet access went up to 90 percent in Finland. (Lintilä & al. 2001, 50).

In addition to the high respect towards public libraries, another characteristic of Nordic culture should be mentioned here, which is the admiration of literary knowledge, accompanied with literacy rates reaching towards 100 percent. (As a side-step it should be mentioned here that according to the UNESCO statistics people in all Nordic countries are among the most avid book readers in the world – but Iceland is totally in a category of its own; in many ways Iceland is an exceptional case when it comes to book production, reading and library use, and because of that, a separate study of digital textuality there would be certainly interesting to read.) All this put together creates an interesting test bed for the case of digital literature. The infrastructure is there, the literary culture and literacy are there, and public access to literature, both print and digital, is well organized. Only one thing lacks, which is the digital literature itself.

The central question in this paper is why is it so – does the (near) non-existence of digital literature in countries where the circumstances seem to be as close to the ideal as one can imagine seriously undermine the belief in the digital literature in general? Or is it rather that too strong a literary culture is foremost an obstacle for the development of digital literature?

To say that electronic literature is non-existent is, naturally, an exaggeration, as there are various projects, experiments, and try-outs happening currently in all the Nordic countries. But it is a huge leap from small scale (and often subsidised) experiments to full blown commercial (or at least professional) production. It is, however, important to distinguish between electronic literature as digitalisation of literature, which is (or could be) also published in print format, and which is referred to when the talk is about 'ebooks'. Another category is natively digital literature, such works that employ the potential of programmed media in ways that render them impossible to be published in print – these works I refer to with the notion of 'cybertexts'. In addition, one should also acknowledge various Web sites where discussion and criticism about literature is carried on. Most of the existing activity belongs to the first or the last category, the cybertext category being the one closest to empty.

I will take a quick glance at some projects carried on in order to promote digital literature in Finland (such as lending ebook devices out from public libraries, publishing national bestsellers in ebook format, establishing literary fora in the Internet, etc.), and seek out what is the current situation. Also, I have checked some similar projects in Sweden, Denmark and Norway to widen my perspective. In this essay I'll try to find some tentative answers to the questions if there is, indeed, a place for literature in the information society.

Virtual libraries

Both academic and public libraries changed their services (browsable catalogues and loaning) into digital form in quite an early phase. Soon after that started the talk about 'virtual libraries'. For some time now, this has mainly meant bibliographies of books and articles categorized by subject, with occasional abstracts included. Lately, there has been a major shift towards including full texts in the virtual libraries too. On a national level, the virtual library development has been organized through the FinELib (the Finnish Electronic Library) Program. Tellingly titled report, *Knowledge Society in Progress* (Varis & Saari, 2003) gives much credit for the work done by FinELib so far. The aim of the program, as formulated in the report, is: "FinELib was launched to support higher education, learning and research in Finland as part of the Information Society Programme" (ibid., 10)¹

As one of the few weaknesses the report sees in FinELib is the lack of Finnish resources and mechanisms to encourage domestic publishing. (ibid., 29) There is simply no local text material available in electronic format, and the report, once again, comes to the conclusion that "until now the emphasis has been more on technical advancement creating new solutions and options for the end-users and partner libraries rather than on contributing to the knowledge society in the broadest sense." (ibid., 31)

One question still to be answered is how or with which devices ebooks will be read on. There have been projects at least in Finland and in Denmark, where libraries have also loaned out the reading devices to accompany the ebooks. There have been both dedicated reading devices and handheld computers used in these projects, but even though it is quite clear that some alternatives to reading on tabletop screens have to be available, the loaning out of this kind of devices cannot work on a larger scale.

Are libraries in the future going to lend or rent ebooks out? With the current pricing models of ebook publishers, it seems that there is really no possibility for the prevailing principle of all-free public libraries. If the tendency is such that books (as ebooks) will turn from products to services (the reader is not purchasing a copy of the ebook, but access to the ebook), it certainly requires some serious innovations to turn these services into library items. On the other hand, FinELib and other such programs (especially from Nordic countries) have aimed at, as an international consortium, to influence the pricing and licensing policies towards more library friendly direction (Varis & Saari 2003, 21)

So far most of the ebook projects at libraries have been based on the no-pay principle. It is, however, quite doubtful if this can be continued if the ebooks at some point really become a significant part of their everyday processes. Thus, the Stockholm University Library chose to bill the students for borrowing ebooks. At the start they found out that "the publishers were less interested in the project than we had expected" (Widmark 2003, 4). The 138 students who took part in the project downloaded 118 times an ebook title for 10 minutes free trial, and only 4 titles in all were downloaded (per pay) for 24 hours reading time. Still, in the questionnaire handed out to the students after the project, two thirds (65%) said they find the idea of having textbooks available as ebooks either very good or good – from this, and some occasional positive comments from the students, Widmark goes on to conclude quite optimistically that "... ebooks seem to develop to a natural medium both in public and academic libraries" (Widmark 2003, 6) There is very much the same spirit in the FinELib report stating that "FinELib should initiate PR-campaigns... in order to promote the use of electronic materials" (Varis & Saari 2003, 33) There is really not that much of *demand* for electronic texts, but a great belief in that since people are not outright hostile towards the idea, they will be hooked once they've been lured to try it. And to make it even easier for people to get into contact with all

this information, "there should be a vision of public broadband access to FinELib material for every citizen" (ibid., 39) And further still, "the challenge of new literacies should be elaborated in a National Media Education Programme also to promote information literacy supported by electronic library services." (ibid., 46)

It seems that in Finland (and in other Nordic countries as well) the libraries have chosen their path, for easily understandable practical reasons. The society puts ever more demands for the libraries while simultaneously cutting down their funding (a silly situation, if something ever is) – in such a situation electronic and virtual services promise a strategy to overcome the problem. Of course, for academic university libraries (as for all libraries with serious non-fiction departments) the growing amount of multimedial and database type publishing creates a need for electronic services – and this need is not based on economy but genuine changes in the publishing world.

Ebook markets

Until the past two years there has been no local language ebook publishing in the Finland to speak of apart from highly specialised professional publications and some dictionary type publications, which have been available in Finland for some ten years now. Lately, the biggest publisher in Finland (WSOY), introduced a line of ebooks through their book club, starting with electronic versions of their current bestsellers. This selection is by now extended to thirty titles. The same seems to apply to other Nordic countries; there is a selection of some dozens of e-titles, just so that one cannot say there is nothing available – but nothing more.

Also, a newcomer in the Finnish book selling markets, Eweline.com, has started with totally electronic selection. They offer ebook versions of titles other publishers have put out as print books – there is probably no obstacle for including originally electronic titles in the list too, but currently there are not many of those available. The enterprise is too new to decide yet how the concept works, but judging from the deals they have come up with major Finnish publishing houses during the last couple of months, at least their activity is getting stronger. It is notable that the list includes mainly (almost exclusively) academic and non-fiction titles, even though this may change.

One big obstacle, in Finland especially, for the ebook publishing is the taxation; whereas print books have been subjected for several years for a relatively low VAT, ebooks are treated as software products, and as such, suffer from higher VAT rate. Once more, a rather paradoxical situation in a country so eager in its aspirations to

be an exemplary case of information society (so much so that there are frequent talks about starting a Ministry of Information Society).

While conducting the Book 2010 project (for an English version of the project report see <http://www.jyu.fi/nykykulttuuri/Kirja2010/index.htm>) about the development trends and future vistas of Finnish book trade it soon became evident that all the bigger, traditional publishing houses were very sceptical about ebooks, let alone cybertext publishing. They were interested in the potential, but they were not eager to make any investments (apart from certain eLearning initiatives) in this field. One explanation behind the doubtfulness seemed (and still seems) to be the bitter experiences with CD-rom publishing. There were high hopes and serious investments in them in the early 90's, but that market never boomed (one exception being France, where there is, at least, CD-rom market to speak of). Now there are some modest, minor scale ebook publishing (as parallel publishing of print originals) experiments, but it feels safe to predict that if there ever will be professional cybertext publishing in the Nordic countries, it will not be done by the established book publishers but by some other instances, probably coming from the so-called new media field (a somewhat similar opinion is expressed by Norwegian Jorunn Danielsen in his column "Are ebooks only a man-thing").

Literary forums in the Internet

Various discussion forums are one important factor in the digitalisation of the literary world. Even if they were focussing on topics related to print literature, they are still dragging one corner of the literary field into the digital realm. The foremost example of this in Finland is *Kiiltomato.net*, which is a web based publishing venue for literary criticism – it was created to open up a space where such books that never got any publicity in the 'mainstream media' (meaning mainly the biggest national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*) could be reviewed. In addition to the reviews, there is a discussion forum, and a bulletin board for literature related announcements. Monthly leader is often ranting about the situation of literature and libraries in the digitalised information society. This is clearly the case of secondary literature gone digital, mildly using such technologies as hypertext linking. There are also some small scale literary magazines published online sharing a rather traditional understanding of literature despite their publishing format.

There has been some activity among creative writing groups, too, to arrange meetings and feedback rounds through mailing lists or web forums. All in all, even though these are mainly rather marginal cases, they still go to show that the literary crowd is not wholly against the digital realm.

Cybertext publishing and the new technologies

Is there any cybertext publishing around in Finland? In any systematic or even commercial way, no. This is the current situation despite the fact there was a very early start in this field. Already in the late 80's and early 90's a group of scholars and students at the University of Tampere produced a couple of hypertext novels in Hypercard format. One of these (*HyperApocalypse*) employed the premise that if the reader is not interested enough in the story and quits reading in less than 15 minutes, all the characters will die, and that'll be the end of the (fictional) work. After that, nothing much has happened, the rare exception being Markku Eskelinen's *Interface I-III*, a highly ambitious combination of print novel and a multifaceted web-based cybertext.²

Just recently, a best selling Finnish fiction author, Ilkka Remes (writer of action-laden thrillers with political intrigues) was granted funding to produce a fictional work employing the Internet, mobile technologies, and game like qualities. The work itself is still to be seen. On a somewhat smaller scale, Tommy Taberman, a popular poet and media personality has run a 'mobile diary' service – people can subscribe to his short daily SMS messages.

And that is about it; and there doesn't seem to be much more activity in the field in other Nordic countries either.

Literary cybertexts

It should be quite evident by now that ebooks are closely linked to education and enlightenment – where there is some ebook development detected, there is also a related eLearning initiative somewhere close. But what about *literary* electronic texts – either with artistic or entertaining aspirations? These seem to be two quite distinct fields. The artistic cybertextuality, as I see it, belongs to the same category with all the other experimental or avantgarde writing. As such, it is by definition not even trying to gain the interest of the big audience, and consequently, its commercial potential is low. For print literature, there are arts and culture funding available, and on the other hand, the publishers are willing to put out works with zero income expectations if their artistic and/or cultural value is deemed high enough. The latter way is mainly blocked for a brave pioneer of cybertextuality. As publishers are already cutting down the non-profit, artistic publication of print books, they quite clearly are not interested in investing for the cybertext experiments. There simply is no such cultural prestige to be gained in the cyberworld, at least not at the moment.

The various funds, on the other hand, seem to be willing to invest in this field. Eskelinen's *Interface* was the first project to receive a grant from the Kordelin Foundation. Interestingly enough, the next author to receive funding for a digital work was a best-selling popular fiction writer with a concept of mixing fiction and game. That is, the writer and the fiction would probably never been selected for the grant, as it is clearly a case of such a commercial product that doesn't really need any additional funding. This leaves the form of the proposed work as the reason for funding. This may have been a good choice, actually, as there is a huge need for public awareness raising if cybertextuality wants to break out from the academic ghetto. This may be comparable, on a smaller scale naturally, to the Stephen King.com endeavour in the US, which took the ebook publishing to a wholly new level of publicity.

The fate of reading

Thus, we could easily dismiss the present lack of cybertext literature (and related structures) as a question of timing. It simply takes much more time to develop the generation of writers, the structure of publishing practices, and foremost, the reading public for something completely different compared to traditional literature. If this change is going to happen, it does so with or without national funding projects and other back-up investments. But there is another possibility too. I believe we have to take seriously the prospect of a radical change – of radical decline – in reading habits. This stance has been presented most eloquently in Sven Birkerts' book *The Gutenberg Elegies. The Fate of Reading in the Electronic Age* (1994). Birkerts' lamentation of the cultural decline related to the rise of the network society has been dismissed by the proponents of electronic literature (by yours truly, too) left-handedly, by referring to the obvious fact that Birkerts doesn't seem to know anything about the serious work of cybertexts there is actually available. But this doesn't really hit the mark of his argument at all, as he is writing about a larger, and more fundamental, change in the Western world. He is not really lamenting that electronic textuality is conquering the place of traditional print literature, but rather that there is no place and no time and no willingness to really read at all, in this new world; that is, to read in a literary sense (which leaves out all the functional reading for work and education).

As I see the situation, the electronically published work of such authors as Markku Eskelinen, or Jan Guillou (who published one of his novels as a web serial before it came out as a book – quite interestingly, he stated if one is going to publish his text in electronic format, it is better to do it before than after the print publication), for example, in Nordic countries, or by M. D. Coverley, Stuart Moulthrop, Michael Joyce,

John Cayley, etc. in the Anglo-American world, very much belong to the literary tradition Birkerts is speaking for. Thus, it is not so much a question if people will read digital literature in the future, but rather, if they will read literature at all. (Of course, this is an exaggeration, one that Birkerts uses, too, as naturally nobody is stating earnestly that literature *in toto* would vanish). There are already statistics in Finland referring to the possibility that reading is less and less popular pastime for youth (also, in all age groups, the amount of persons who had read books during the last 12 months, has come down by 10 percent during the 90's). There is a well-known phenomenon amongst teenagers, where reading suddenly decreases, only to gradually increase again around college age. So far it is impossible to say for sure if we are witnessing a genuine generational change, or if it is, after all, only a temporarily strengthened version of the old pattern. It is often stated that even though the *reading of books* might be decreasing, people are reading other types of texts instead, most notably magazines and Internet pages, so, all in all, the amount of time spent for reading is continuously increasing. There is quite a strong resonance with this reasoning in the conclusion of the FinELib report: "Media literacy is multidimensional while digital literacy may refer to the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers. Digital literacy can simply be a new way of thinking." (Varis & Saari 2003, 51) In the elegiac mood of Birkerts, this is false optimism indeed – reading literature is an activity fundamentally different from this kind of text-zapping and functional reading.

The situation may change, with a faster or slower pace, but currently one cannot but draw the conclusion that there is really no demand for electronic, and even less for cybertextual, literature in Finland; neither is there much creativity invested in it. (Nor, for that matter, much research interest – the strong Nordic presence among the digital literature scholars suddenly seems to be dispersed, as researchers one by one have shifted their focus from literature to computer games, digital television, blogs etc.) Why is it so, while the situation especially in the US, and to some extent in France and Germany, shows that in bigger language areas multiple fields of cyberliterature have emerged?

Partial explanation might be, at least in Finland, that the popular taste is favouring realism. The dominant reading strategy relies upon the assumption of verisimilitude between fiction and reality. This has led to a rather thin tradition of experimental writing in general, and could reflect upon opinions over playful cybertexts especially. Literary taste, and the horizon of expectations, then, would work against the emergence of new cybertextual developments. Sweden differs here quite clearly from Finland, as there is a much stronger tradition of experimental and 'cybernetic' writing (see articles by Ingvarsson and Olsson in this issue of *Dichtung Digital*). A remarkable newer example of this kind of writing is Sven Lindqvist's non-fictional *A History of Bombing* with its twenty-two 'entrances' and multilinear structure.

Another partial explanation is probably the bookish culture of Nordic countries. It is not so much about valuing literary knowledge alone, but appreciating books themselves as precious artefacts. People want to have thick, hardcover volumes, which look like books. Suffice it to say, that in Finland paperback books have only had a few percents share of the book market for decades – only during the last couple of years has paperback publishing started to show some upward thrust.

Third explanation comes from quite a different direction, from the inherently global perspective of information society concepts. In this world, what matters are products and formats, which easily can be adopted all over the globe. Literature, tightly tied to national languages (which in the cases of all Nordic countries happen to be very small indeed), does not suit the expectations of the architects of the globalized digital world. Whereas the Finnish national identity in the late 19th century was essentially based upon literature, the renewed sense of nationality in the network society seems indifferent, if not almost hostile, to literature. For traditional literati this should be good news, really, since this gives new ground for print literature as the vantage point from which to critically comment upon increasingly homogenised digital reality. The great novel about the estranged information society still keeps us waiting, though. It is maybe decades too early to expect the great cyberwork dealing with the intricacies of the networked cyberworld to appear. And even then, it may well emerge from somewhere else than the Information Society grazed Northern Europe where people are way too busy with information and its transitions in order to be able anymore to stop for a while to read and to think – and to react to their reading.

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Notes

1. The Finnish word 'tietoyhteiskunta' covers both meanings of 'information society' and 'knowledge society', and there is often confusion about how it is used in any given occasion. I prefer here 'information society', as there is always a strong connection to information technology in Finnish discussions.
2. There has been some other academic experiments in hypertext fiction around the Nordic countries in the early 90's, but the interest in general seems to have been more on MUD's, MOO's and other game related activities, and lately, on blogs. Norwegians especially have been highly influential in MOO development.