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contextualising digital art and writing between 1998 - 2005

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Interview by Simon Mills

SM: I was recently at a talk where the panel agreed that hypertext fiction was dead! As a hypertext author do you think the perception of hypertext fiction has changed over the last 10 years?

SR: That's sort of like saying that the haiku is dead. I'm deeply suspicious of panels that announce the death of anything but people. Literary forms like haiku, sonnets, or hypertext fiction don't actually die, they just become less or more predominant. To my knowledge, literary hypertext was never a dominant form, but was always experimental and marginal in the popular consciousness. I think there has been a change in the perception of hypertext. While ten years ago it may have seemed like a radically new form, and there were proclamations about that it was the future of the writing or the end of the book or whatever, now it is just one of many forms of writing for the electronic media. I think that rather than dying, it has perhaps reached a mellow middle age. Hypertext isn't the young Turk anymore. I also think it's important, and a sign of maturity, that we no longer hear much talk about hypertext overtaking printed literature, or somehow replacing the book. I don't think it makes sense to think about writing for the computer and the network as some kind of predatory, invasive species. E-Lit is a relatively small, experimental, deeply interesting corner of the world's literary output. I don't expect to live to see the first hypertext that's a commercial success in the bestseller list sense of success, and for that matter, I don't really want to see it. I'd rather be a part of a field that is creating intensely strange reading experiences for their own sake, rather than for filthy lucre.

One of the challenges of new media is our deep fascination with "newness." Over the past decade, we have seen so many different technical approaches to electronic writing that it's possible to focus on and value almost exclusively the form in which a thing is written. There are so many "firsts" in new media writing that we tend to lose sight of seconds, and thirds, and so on. I don't think that every work of electronic literature should have to be doing something new from a technical standpoint. There are plenty of interesting things to be done in established new media forms, plenty of territories that have been discovered yet not fully mapped. This is almost definitionally a problem of all avant-garde cultural practices. Once a form of writing or art is no longer new you suddenly have scholars at panel discussions declaring it dead. Baby-killers.

What I've seen over the past decade has actually been a kind of widening of the umbrella of electronic literature. While people are still writing link-and-node hypertext, you don't see this theory-driven halo around it anymore declaring it more privileged than other sorts of electronic writing. Hypertext is one of many different techniques for writing in electronic media. Now when we think of electronic literature we also think of interactive fiction, flash poetry, story and poetry generation, networked collaborative writing, interactive drama, email narratives, various kinds of installations, literary works that make use of GPS data, and so on. Many of these kinds of electronic writing, such as story generators and IF, are actually older than hypertext. They've already been declared dead several times, and now they are resurging in their afterlife.

SM: How do you see your practice as a writer has changed over the past 10 years? How has your work progressed and why has it moved in the direction it has?

SR: Hmmm. Well, ten years ago, I actually hadn't even contemplated writing hypertext. I was writing short stories and had written a couple of plays. Since we wrote *The Unknown*, eight or nine years ago, I guess I've become interested in exploring other types of writing for new media. *The Meddlesome Passenger* used hypertext, but in a different way than it was used in *The Unknown*, serving as a kind of paratext to the main text. *Kind of Blue* was an email narrative, and though the technology involved was simple, I found the constraints involved in writing and publishing a novel in real-time, in which the characters were living in the same temporal reality as the readers, fascinating. *Implementation* of course is a novel published on stickers. The network in that project served as an archive for

the project, a place to communicate with our participant readers, who downloaded stickers, placed them in the world, and returned photos to us and the site, though obviously there's nothing explicitly electronic about stickers. Lately I'm interested in working on different kinds of combinatory literature, and in projects that connect electronic writing with the physical world.
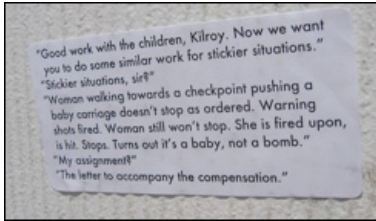
From the perspective of what I'm actually writing about, most of my projects have some connection to the absurd political reality we find ourselves in. I think that the Unites States in particular and the Western world in general is going through a very sad and strange historical moment right now. *Kind of Blue* and *Implementation* are both in some ways reflections on the war on terror or whatever they're calling it this week. I read an article last week that the U.S. military has shifted to referring to it as "the long war." So in a general sense I'm trying to write about living through this time, to make some sense of it.

I've also been busy teaching my students, reading their writing, and trying to make some contributions to the scholarly discourse of new media studies. I've started working on a book that will examine emerging genres of electronic literature in the context of 20th century avant-garde art and writing movements. I think there are a lot of interesting connections between what people are doing now and what people like the Dada, the Surrealists, the Fluxus, the language poets, the Oulipo, and postmodern fiction writers were doing decades ago. I also think it's useful to examine new media writing as a kind of cultural movement, even if it isn't driven by any sort of manifesto.

SM: How do you see the state of Electronic Literature? How do you see the future of writing using New Media?

SR: The state of electronic literature is strong (applause). Its budget is balanced and its future is bright. Actually, I'm currently editing the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume One* with Nick Montfort, Stephanie Strickland, and Katherine Hayles. It is a Creative Commons licensed collection of electronic literature that will be published this fall on CD-ROM and the web by the Electronic Literature Organization. Working on this project has been very encouraging. We recieved about 120 submissions and are publishing 60 works of electronic literature in the first volume. The *Collection* will include a wide variety of types of new media writing written over the past decade. When you look at a group of work like that, I think you can't help but feel encouraged about the future of writing using new media. In spite of the fact that there is functionally no commercial market for this type of work, there is a truly robust community of creative people who have been consistently making compelling reading experiences for the computer. The publication and distribution of the collection should be a landmark event for the field, and we're planning on doing this annually. One terrific aspect of the project is that all of the works published on it will be licensed with a Creative Commons non-commercial/attribution license, which means that anyone who wants can install the whole thing on their computer, share it with friends, even install it on every computer lab in an entire school, without having to ask permission or pay license fees.

I've also been encouraged by what I've seen recently at events like the recent E-Fest at Brown University. Not only are the "old hands" coming up with new projects, but there is also a new generation of young writers who are taking E-Lit in new directions. Not to mention my own students, dozens of whom have created interesting old-school hypertext fiction over the past four years. And of course, in a general sense the future of writing using new media is already here. Everyone I know regularly uses email, for instance. Network textuality is a significant part of our everyday lives in a practical way. I can only guess that art will follow our quotidian engagement with reading and writing on the network.

The only things I find discouraging are institutional—I'd like, for instance, to see more (make that *any*) MFA creative writing programs that embrace electronic writing as a legitimate mode of creative practice. While new media is finding a place in art programs, communication/media programs, and in a limited sense in literature programs, universities in the U.S. and elsewhere could do much more to encourage the practice side of electronic writing. While it's great to see so much interesting work coming out of art and digital media programs, it would also be beneficial for more writing programs to bring the kind of text-centric line-by-line scrutiny that writing workshops encourage to the production of new media writing.

SM: How do you deal with the environmental reception of your work? People read on the Internet in many different ways and situations and these can often totally change the original work. How do you write/create for a New Media audience, which isn't always a static audience, in terms of level?

SR: I'm not totally sure what you mean, but I think you're getting at the kind of fragmented, multi-tasking, short attention span type of reading behaviour endemic to network reading practices. In which case, yes. I do try to take that into account. I tried to write a bit about this in my dissertation, *Destination Unknown: Experiments in The Network Novel*. I think that it's important to realize that we all read differently on the network than we do from a printed book, or in particular than we do when we're reading print novels, and anything written in hypertext is by nature fragmented. So in something like *The Unknown*, we tried to create a reading experience that could be appreciated in parts, in small ten or fifteen minute bursts of reading, and that would also reward sustained, concentrated, "immersive" reading. The same is true of *Implementation*. While the novel itself is 240 stickers long, readers who encounter only one or two stickers in the wild should also come away with a kernel of story, an interesting narrative moment. We need to think about things like narrative arc and character development differently in writing network fiction, and sort of embrace the fragmented nature of network consciousness.

SM: I'm interested that you want to contextualise new media writing as a kind of cultural movement. It seems to me that new media art is a continuation of a number of art historical movements and the idea that it somehow forms a significant break is dubious. However I've struggled with the concept of electronic literature as well. The fact that we can "read" new media works using a number of techniques from different disciplines (film studies, computer science, music, games) makes me think that the use of the word literature is problematical due to its long term association with the book and literary theory. I guess it's

really just a matter of terminology. Have you found this to be an issue?

SR: I'm not sure we're saying different things here—I agree with you completely that electronic literature springs from a number of historical art and literary movements, and think that we can develop a better framework for understanding how and why that is the case. I also don't think that we're talking about a movement in the same sense as say the Surrealists, or the Situationists, or the Oulipo were movements. Those groups did things like write manifestos and sign off on them, and kept lists of who was and who wasn't a member. What's going on in new media is decentered, distinct from but related to that sort of organized collective activity. I do think there is a sort of movement-like activity going on here, in that the practice of new media art and writing constitutes a rejection, or at least reconfiguration, of the modes of distribution familiar from either print culture or the established art world. The idea of what it means to be successful as a new media writer or artist is radically different from what it means to be successful in print literary culture. The idea of audience is radically different. And there is a kind of politics to what we do. While the fact that most electronic literature is freely distributed, on an open access, international network might seem like it is just the default, or the symptom of a cultural form that hasn't yet found its market, I think the gift economy is an important aspect of the identity of the new media writer, and I celebrate that. There is a sense in which all art produced for the network is outsider art and yet simultaneously international, if that makes sense. It's a movement in the sense that we're forming these sort of peer to peer networks of cultural practice, that we share with and borrow from and collaborate with each other in this floating world that, from the standpoint of established conventional literary and art cultures, is all but invisible.

I remain a fan of the term "electronic literature"— you of course can read new media writing from whatever perspectives you choose to. It's really just a matter of what you want to focus on. I personally think that it is important to preserve the idea of "reading." For instance, there are a lot of poems produced in Flash. If you wanted to, you could describe all of them as "web-based animations" but in doing so you'd be de-emphasizing the fact that they are poems and foregrounding the fact that they are animations. I think a careful reading of any given piece is going to try to take into account multiple modalities of experiencing it. For all of the differences these forms have from those of print, there is a rich and useful toolset available to us from literary studies that I wouldn't like to see abandoned as completely outmoded. And from the perspective of writing forms of fiction for new media, basic things like character, setting, plot, etc. are still important to me.

SM: How do you find your students respond to the idea of electronic literature? How do they react to reading literature in the same environment that they use for messaging, blogging, browsing and myspace etc.

SR: During the time I've been teaching, I've found my students becoming increasingly open to the possibilities and affordances of new media writing. My literature students are always a little bit disoriented the first time I force them to encounter a work with the same sort of substance, that requires that the same sort of attention and analysis, as say a print novel, in the same environment as they are WTFing and LOLing their friends in AIM or updating their profiles in myspace, but they get used to the water and quickly learn how to swim in it. In some ways writing for new media comes more easily to them than does reading, for instance, hypertext, but once they spend a few weeks immersed in the field, they tend to forget that initial sense of disorientation. It's also remarkable how quickly the creative writers find their feet, and how eager they become to write in a multilinear fashion. I think that as more and more of pop culture has moved online, types of writing and reading that have some affinities with the types of reading/viewing/interacting behaviors people engage in when using other parts of the network begin to seem more "natural" and less foreign.

SM: Do you think the commercialisation of the internet has affected artists use of it as a site to challenge established culture?

SR: Not really. The wonderful thing about the internet is that by its nature it will never be the same type of centrally controlled media environment as, say, television. While certain entities might command more of the traffic and control and filter much of the internet that most people use and see, there will always room for independent producers to create whatever they want to create and get across whatever message they want to get across. No matter how commercial most of the network may seem, there is a thriving bulletproof underground on the internet. The internet serves as a kind of carnivalesque incubator for subcultures, so I think it will always be a site to challenge the establishment(s).

Now, I think the question of whether or not artists can actually affect change through their art is another matter: I wrote a poem! Neil Young released an album! Are we still at war? Sadly yes, thirty-one people killed in Baghdad today, we appear to remain in a state of war.

Nevertheless one can hope, and express, and try.

SM: Whenever there is talk of writing creatively there usually follows the question of being able to make a living. You've already mentioned that electronic literature is predominantly freely distributed and that the Internet is a "carnivalesque" environment. Given this how does one resolve the issue of getting paid for one's work? Do you see more opportunities for paid writing on the Internet in recent years?

SR: Well, most print writers—poets, fiction writers, dramatists—are no better off in this regard. While the potential for the big paycheck exists, the majority of the writers I know don't actually make their living off of writing. Most of them are teachers, or waiters, or management consultants, or whatever. And I do find it heartening that most of the people I know who were creating E-Lit six or seven years ago are now teaching it somewhere. You are now employed at a university, for instance, as is Sue Thomas—Talan Memmott, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Mark Amerika, Brian Kim Stefans, and many others are as well. A lot of people doing interesting art and writing in new media are somehow surviving within the lukewarm bosom of higher education. Most of the people who write E-Lit and who are willing to make their way through the grind of advanced degrees and academic job searches do end up employed. Once we're teachers, we face different pressures and responsibilities and constraints, but most of us find some time to nurture our own odd little muses as well.

Sure, there are markets for writing in general on the internet. Plenty of journalists and creative types in advertising agencies are making a living there. But the paying markets for creative work are few and far between. I expect it will remain that way for the foreseeable future. While it would be nice for there to be some well-funded online journals or prizes for electronic writers, in a way I think it's great that all this is happening outside of formal markets right now. It's giving us an opportunity to rethink the way that cultural artifacts can and should be distributed.

SM: What currently interests you? What do you see as the next area that needs to be worked on? Does it involve new media?

SR: In terms of new media forms, the two things I have working in the back of my mind right now are geolocated narratives and collective narratives. Nonlinear stories that make noninvasive use of technologies to unfold narrative in physical real-world environments, and narratives that are told through the structured contributions of multiple (or many) writers. I'd like to create a project or two in each of those forms over the next couple of years. And who knows, someday *The Unknown* might get back together for one more tour. I might also write a plain old link and node hypertext just to piss off the people who went to the hypertext funeral.

I also think there's still quite a bit of field-building to be done here—creating publishing structures, organizing gatherings for the electronic literature community in the US and Europe, finding ways to fund interesting projects. The kind of work that ELO and trAce have been doing needs to continue. We're also still establishing a critical discourse, and I'm hoping to contribute there as well. While new media writing has to a certain extent lost the sheen and excitement of its newness, I think we're entering the stage of its more widespread acceptance and institutionalization. If most of the first and second wave of new media writers are now teaching younger thinkers and writers, I expect that we will continue to see more interesting work. To put it another way, I've always thought that it was a bit silly to think of new media writing as being "*the* future of*" writing. New media forms are merely particularly interesting juke joints located at intersections in some of the stranger neighborhoods of the future of writing. I think that fewer people are burning torches, carrying pitchforks, and waving placards to evict us now, and more people are wandering in from off the main street to see what kind of music we're playing.

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