

Digital Literature and Critical Theory

Annika Elstermann

First published 2023

ISBN: 978-1-032-42241-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-42242-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-36190-9 (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-000-82649-4 (eBook+)

Introduction

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003361909-1

The funder for this chapter is Universität Heidelberg

Introduction

Though it may currently be the most prevalent mode of prose narrative, the novel as we know it today has only existed for a few centuries – a short time relative to the history of human civilisation and storytelling. Just like drama and poetry, it evolved from other forms and has itself been undergoing continuous transformation. Changes in societies, including technological advances, have always been reflected not only in the subject matter of our stories, but also in the way that those stories are produced and received. In contrast to oral tradition, the spread of script and writing brought with it the creation of a textual artefact which can be transmitted in a more stable form disconnected from its original speaker or author. Moveable-type printing and the mass production of written texts not only revolutionised the distribution and accessibility of literature, but in the process also raised questions about copyright and intellectual property – and about a work’s aura, authenticity, and the alienation of the final product from its production process. During the industrial revolution, gas lamps (and later electric lights) allowed for reading after dark and, along with urbanisation catalysed by new working conditions, helped increase literacy even in working-class households, diversifying the audience composition and opening the market for new types of literature as well as new groups of authors. The lasting impact of those technological developments is undeniable, and no doubt the rapid advance of digital media has already carried – and will continue to carry – a similarly large significance in terms of how we produce and consume literature.

Since the hypertext stories of the 1980s and 1990s, digital literature has branched out into many different forms and with widespread internet access in many parts of the world, content distribution is often global and immediate, its curation highly individualised, and access to it practically constant. The proliferation of modes through which stories are being told in a digital context – from social media to online fanfiction to video games – means at the very least a medial shift away from traditional ink-on-paper; and as technology permeates our daily lives, so do electronically transmitted stories.

2 Introduction

Alongside these new forms of literature, a new subfield of literary analysis has emerged and rapidly expanded over the past two decades, with works by Espen Aarseth, Astrid Ensslin, George Landow, N. Katherine Hayles, Alice Bell, Marie-Laure Ryan, and others as important milestones in the academic exploration of digital literature. What most of these approaches share is a focus on the new: those features which differentiate digital literature from printed texts, and how literary scholarship can adapt to them with new categories, terminology, and methods. This makes sense intuitively – the subject matter is, after all *digital* material, whose unique defining characteristic is based on technological innovation. However, taken to an extreme, this type of approach would mean declaring digital literature and the contemporary moment as incomparable, and thus isolated from past cultural production, methods of literary analysis, historical contexts, and social theory. And it is precisely those aspects – the striking similarities between digital forms and completely analogue texts, parallel developments, the applicability of postmodern theory – which I have found particularly interesting in analysing and theorising digital literature.

Starting out from a debate so far often necessarily dominated by the idea of a break rather than that of continuities, I thus want to link these seemingly new phenomena to previous, at times historical developments, both in terms of literary forms themselves and of theoretical concepts. Viewing digital literature as part of an ongoing tradition instead of a new niche phenomenon can add to our understanding of our contemporary situation and the way it finds expression in literary and cultural output. Continuities can help us tease out why digital literary forms as well as broader social contexts might be the way they are, not just because they are technologically possible, but because there is a human drive behind them – desires, anxieties, habits, and affects, but also interests of global capitalism. By foregrounding continuities and the connection between digital phenomena and pre-digital literature and theory, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of overarching developments, and of the human element in these digital contexts – and, not least, of the relevance of the theories and methodologies of literary analysis in this digital age.

This, of course, by no means invalidates or refutes previous work on digital literature, which has prioritised the new, and which has doubtless contributed greatly to understanding and theorising certain aspects of these forms. This book merely adds another piece to the puzzle by arguing that there is also much to be gained by conceptualising digital forms of literature not as separate from non-digital ones, but as part of a continuous, evolving tradition. The aim at the core of this book is a reciprocally fruitful synthesis of increasingly popular and culturally significant forms of digital literature on the one hand, and established literary and critical theory on the other: reading digital texts through the

lens of canonical theory, but also reading this more traditional theory through the lens of digital texts and related media.

Because some of the works examined in this book might not be instantly recognisable as literary texts, particularly to scholars of more traditional forms, definitions of what constitutes both literature and the digital might seem in order at this point. Neither are as clear as one might hope, or entirely objective, but rather than pose an obstacle, such ambiguities will continue to nourish arguments throughout this book.

The broadest and most basic definition of literature for the purpose of this book is: any text that can be written down¹ and that is or can be analysed by a literary critic in a potentially meaningful way. If this definition is not circular, it is certainly one which can only be verified in hindsight, and which can never exclude any work conclusively. Perhaps there is a hint of the dictatorial decree to it as well: whatever we discuss is made literature by that merit – but then, academic canonisation has always operated on similar principles. As will become evident throughout this book, much of what can be found in the digital sphere is not so far removed at all from what we self-evidently recognise as literature already. Where examples are not quite as clearly literary, bridging that gap can generate valuable insights. This book will look at writing on Twitter and Reddit, at video games, and at computer-generated texts in depth, but also consider podcasts, fanfiction, streaming services, and related phenomena.

Drawing clear lines around the “digital” is similarly challenging as it is to pinpoint what is literary. As N. Katherine Hayles points out, “almost all contemporary literature is *already* digital. Except for a handful of books produced by fine letter presses, print literature consists of digital files throughout most of its existence” (159). Printed books, she argues, might be regarded as “a particular form of output for digital files rather than a medium separate from digital instantiation” (ibid.). To be able to distinguish digital literature somewhat more usefully from a printed novel that was written using a word processor and typeset on a computer, several works, including Hayles’s, invoke the category of “digital born” literature (ibid. 160), which is “created and meant to be performed in digital media” (ibid.). I want to deviate from this slightly by trading the “and” in that sentence for an “and/or”, since what is often called “computer-mediated” reception (see e.g. Hayles 163; similarly Ryan 99) need not be the only way of experiencing what I would still term *digital literature*.

So for the purposes of this book, literature is digital if digital technology plays an integral part in its production and/or reception. The participatory situation analysed in Chapter 3, for instance, is made possible only through a platform which enables asynchronous dialogue with an option for direct response, instant publication, and a degree of anonymity. While the end result could also be printed out and read

4 *Introduction*

on paper, the digital cannot be removed from the production setting without fundamentally changing it. The same can be said for computer-generated texts: A sonnet composed by an algorithm can be copied out by hand, but the process of its production is inextricably entangled with the calculating capacities offered by a computer, which is what makes the output unpredictable even for the programmer. The text of a tweet on the other hand could easily be written down without a computer; that it is adapted to the constraints of Twitter, as well as published and read in the specific context of that platform, however, makes it digital in the reception setting.

Both of these definitions – that of literature and that of the digital – in their vagueness encompass a broad variety of texts; at this point, there is little to be gained from arbitrary, categorical rules of exclusion. That, however, poses a pragmatic problem for the scope of this book; thus, I want to begin by explaining what I will not examine, and which approaches I will not take – and why.

Lines of Demarcation and Previous Research

Particularly considering its widespread popularity among younger audiences, digital literature lends itself to analysis in a classroom/education context. It is unsurprising therefore that many works on digital forms – from hypertext to video games – have either a focus or at least an outlook on teaching digital texts or else utilising them in classroom settings to teach other topics.² Because digital literature in the classroom has already been discussed so extensively elsewhere, and because this book cannot make a useful addition in the form of fieldwork without considerably shifting its trajectory, the matter of classroom application will be excluded entirely here.

Furthermore, covering every digital form is neither realistically possible nor expedient, and would necessitate generalisations at the cost of theoretical depth. Some forms, such as augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR), have not produced quite enough material beyond the strictly avant-garde yet, particularly in the realm of narrative media. While it would no doubt be interesting to begin constructing a theoretical framework for such highly immersive forms now, studies on this will be conducted far more effectively in a few years, when there might be more primary works to be explored, demanding less reliance on speculation. Other forms, such as hypertext stories and blog fiction, have seen a decline in productivity and in popular reception. These will still come up in other contexts – because they share features with other forms, or because theories on hypertext laid the foundation for a discussion of interactive narratives – but will not constitute a central topic of analysis.

Fanfiction, meanwhile, has been a consistently productive field in recent years, which has been gaining popular appreciation outside of the

digital sphere as well: the most recent notable recognition came in 2019, when fanfiction website *Archive Of Our Own* (AO3) received the World Science Fiction Society's Hugo Award, signalling the acceptance of fanfiction firmly within genre mainstream culture. Yet in spite – and partly because – of this, fanfiction will be relegated to the fringes of this book. For one, fanfiction is not inherently digital: reworking existing narratives and expanding on other authors' storyworlds has a long tradition in literary history. That which is digital about fanfiction published online – the distribution modes, communities, gift exchange culture – falls more into the expertise of sociologists and has been discussed in that field and adjacent interdisciplinary works at length. Fanfiction is currently one of the most thoroughly researched areas of digital literature.³ Because of this wealth of existing material, of which more is certain to come, fanfiction will only receive cursory glances at points where it helps to illustrate or contrast phenomena found elsewhere.

Apart from specific formats, there is a myriad of peripheral developments connected to the rise of digital literature and online publication. While some of these, such as accessibility, the potential for dialogue, and changing author-reader-dynamics, will be at the core of this book, others do not fit the scope of the primarily literary/cultural studies approach employed here. The way in which the book market in general, for instance, is changing – review culture, online sales platforms, author self-publicity on social media – is a topic not entirely unrelated to the spread of digital literature, but so vast that it supplies enough material for multiple separate works with an interdisciplinary approach between literary studies and sociology.

One issue that invariably comes up with digital media is that of text stability, and this, too, will not be examined closely here. There certainly are concerns worthy of attention here: the sustainability of data storage media, software compatibility, and the fleeting nature of online content, to name only a few. Contrary to an oft-repeated warning, anything that is posted online is not necessarily there for eternity. Gérard Genette points out that there can be paratext without the text that it used to accompany if that artefact is lost (*Paratexts* 4), and the brief history of electronic literature is full of examples for this.⁴ A website might still exist, but have become defunct; one online publication of the once-canonical *afternoon, a story*⁵ is no longer maintained and entirely incompatible with modern browsers. A website might be abandoned, or migrated and texts lost in the process, as happened with Peter Christian's collaborative poetry project *Spoonbill Generator*. Content can, quite plainly, be modified or deleted at any time. This is problematic if any type of canonisation is ever to take place, or if historical developments are to be traced in digital literature by working with primary sources rather than piecing together information from still-existing paratextual remains such as reviews or scholarship, or the skeletal fragments of a no longer functional website.

6 Introduction

Material created in or for outdated technologies can usually be salvaged through emulators, if the effort is made, and research into durable, long-term storage media is ongoing. While all of this has consequences relevant to literary studies, the matter itself, however, falls more within the expertise of archival studies. It affects the work conducted in this book regarding, for instance, availability of material, but will not be discussed in depth or solved here.

Another variety of text (in)stability more clearly within the domain of literary studies, and thus relevant for this study, is that of the individually unstable text: once a reader can make a (conscious or unconscious) choice that alters the following segments of text in any way, e.g. in hypertext or video games, the textual experience is unique and might not be reproducible by the same or other readers. There are, in any case, variations rather than one single authoritative text. This, again, is not something literary scholars are unfamiliar with. Peter Paul Schnierer suggests that this aspect of hypertext might be dealt with “in the way one judges, analyses and writes about a multiplicity of theatrical productions of an unstable text” (“Graphic ‘Novels’, Cyber ‘Fiction’, Multiform ‘Stories’” 545). No two performances of a play are ever exactly alike, and even in writing, there are considerable differences for instance between the Folio and Quarto editions of Shakespeare’s plays (*ibid.*; see also Dutton 2). Outside of drama, William Blake developing his poems and Oscar Wilde revising *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from the magazine to the novel edition are only two of countless examples. Literary scholars thus seem to be able either to deal with textual variation, or to ignore it while still producing valid and valuable analyses of one variant of a text; we should be able to do the same with digital literature. However, digital forms can hold an amount of intransparent variability that impacts the reading experience as well as the way we approach interpretation, and thus this form of text instability and its consequences will play a larger role particularly in the later analysis chapters.

Aims, Approach, and Structure

Even these considerable limitations still leave a sizeable amount of material and possible questions, which merit some additional specification. This book examines digital literature with a particular focus on differences and similarities between digital and traditional forms of literature and the relationship between pre-digital literary and cultural theory and twenty-first century digital literature. To do this, I want to analyse these forms not in isolation, but in context. The treatment of digital texts as a niche separate from established literature makes sense historically, but at this point does not do justice anymore to the many forms of digital narratives that are deeply embedded in everyday media consumption – the days of hypertext as an avant-garde form are long gone.

Schnierer argues that

[s]ince the phenomenon we are faced with is new, we must not make the mistake of immediately requiring new or contemporaneous forms of criticism. In fact, we need to test conventional approaches first. Only when these fail can we legitimately empower unconventional ones or develop new theories.

(“Modernist at Best” 96)

In his paper, the reason given for this is that “[c]hanging multiple variables [the form of the text and the methods employed in its analysis] simultaneously is never a good idea” (ibid.). I would take this one step further and propose that not only might we be able to utilise existing tools and theories for the study of digital literature – doing so actually offers an opportunity to re-examine and recontextualise those methods and sharpen our toolkit. Traditional theory cannot always be applied directly or without complication to digital forms. Rather than ignore that friction or construct entirely new tools to circumvent it, we can examine its origin and thereby add a new dimension to established theory. This, then, can supply a strategy for dealing with digital forms, while also helping us find new approaches to non-digital literature, and providing insight into the continuities between the two. Examining, for instance, foundational theories of and from postmodernism from the vantage point of twenty-first-century digital literature can help us understand the larger scope of ongoing cultural developments, investigate the continued relevance and/or transferability of postmodern theory, and pinpoint what exactly is new about certain digital forms – and what trajectories this implies.

Some questions reoccur throughout this study. How are the dynamics between author, writer, reader, narrator, character, story, discourse, and interpretation as we know them evolving in digital contexts? How are these relationships being renegotiated in new forms to change them into something new, or alternatively to retain the established dynamics in a changed setting? And what can be gained by recontextualising traditional approaches to such shifted contexts and dynamics? To answer these questions, I will not proceed form by form or platform, but rather by phenomena such as seriality, segmentation, and interactivity. This is because most of the forms examined here hold multiple phenomena, and identifying and comparing themes and trends common across different media promises broader insights into developments in digital literature as a whole than a mere description of individual formats in isolation.

Chapter 2 (“Partitioned Works and Seriality”) considers digital seriality and segmentation in comparison to the Victorian serial, looking first at the role of technology as a catalyst for seriality, then at different concepts of time and structure reinforced by serial publications, at (non-)teleology, and finally at the ways in which serial forms can build communities or

8 Introduction

isolate readers in imagined communities to fictional characters. As serial narratives are so embedded into the everyday, this chapter is oriented more strongly than others towards cultural studies and takes historical developments and social realities into account, drawing on research in the field of Victorianism as well as the theories of Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard on postmodernism and consumerism. A wide variety of examples from different areas of digital literature will be taken into account rather than focussing on a core example or case study, as digital seriality is too pervasive and too varied to single out one representative text. Rob Allen and Thijs van Berg say of popular media in general that “serialization has been so pivotal in the development of fiction, film, television and video games that we cannot fully understand the development of these forms *as* popular media without first tracing the influence of serialization” (Allen and van den Berg 1). Not only does this hold true for all digital forms as well; I want to go a step further and claim that we cannot understand the forms themselves, not just their development as popular media, without first grasping their serial nature. The current pervasiveness of seriality is why I want to examine serial form before other phenomena that might be more particular to the digital context – because they cannot be thought without it.

The following chapter (3, “Participatory Storytelling”) picks up the serially isolated reader and shows ways in which digital storytelling can and does support an intersubjective dialogue. Any online platform that allows for social exchange also enables communicative participation in all narration, factual or fictional. Likes, shares, and replies are integral to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and even news sites – the idea of providing a dedicated space for comments and a streamlined toolkit for reader reactions, for example established mechanics for “likes” or “upvotes”, is ubiquitous. This chapter focusses on reader participation in the form of comments posted directly underneath a story instalment, and specifically such comments that enter the narrative level – not mere meta commentary or opinion-stating, but participation in the story itself. When navigating a field with a terminology that is not yet established enough for similar concepts not to be mixed up, it is necessary to draw clear lines of demarcation to neighbouring phenomena that are not participatory narration in the same sense. “Participatory culture” is a phrase that also comes up in the context of fanfiction writing and other aspects of fandom (cf. e.g. Jenkins 1992; Orgeron 2009), but this is not the participation meant here. Rather, this chapter concerns itself with the presentation of a text in a specifically participatory setting where reader comments become part of that presentation. Additionally, this phenomenon also differs from the participatory reader as conceptualised in existing narratological terminology, as the reader now enters the narrative level and actively engages as part of the presentation of the text itself. Because of the distinctive position of these comments at the literal and figurative fringe

of the main text, I will turn to Gérard Genette's *Paratexts* as a guiding thread for this chapter to explore how paratext facilitates participation, and how author-reader-dynamics are being negotiated in this paratextual space. Analysing the intricacies of these dynamics requires some extent of practical in-depth scrutiny. Hence, this chapter centres on one case study (the *Mold* saga on Reddit, outlined briefly in Chapter 1), which can be regarded as representative for online participatory storytelling contexts and incorporates a wide variety of paratextual elements. Other examples are called on when appropriate to underscore or contrast certain points, and to illustrate the transferability of observations and approaches outlined in this chapter to different contexts.

Chapter 4 ("Interactive Text Production") then turns from paratext to the text itself, and to matters of text creation and meaning-making. Of the phenomena examined in depth in this book, interactive fiction has generated by far the most studies over the last twenty-five years. This is partly rooted in the history of the field: the agency that hypertext provided to readers in organising their own paths through a narrative maze was the first academically noted innovation in digital literature. Additionally, interactive narratives in the form of video games are among the most widely received forms of media today, which makes them appealing objects of analysis in a variety of fields. Here, the focus is on the different roles the reader can – and sometimes has to – take on to varying degrees in the context of interactive fiction, its potential for enhancing empathy, and the complex dynamics of reciprocal influence between reader and text, which are approached using Michel Foucault's theory of power.

Lastly, Chapter 5 ("Computer-Generated Text") employs an analysis of various principles of algorithmically supported text production to re-evaluate the roles of authors and readers, using Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" as points of departure to question how analysis and interpretation contribute to the process of meaning-making. Computer-generated text lends itself particularly well for a recontextualisation of these theories, since they encapsulate their realisation in a way that Barthes and his contemporaries could not have taken into account. With these forms, the matter is no longer that the author's intent might be unknown or ought to be disregarded, but that there has never been one, and it is when there truly never was an author to a text that ideas of the author's death can be tested, problematised, and adapted. And, though it may still seem avant-garde, computer-generated text is as embedded into our everyday lives as all the other phenomena discussed in this book, through technologies such as chatbots and predictive texting.

These analysis chapters draw from a variety of examples, an introduction to some of which is given in Chapter 1, covering the basic mechanics of Twitter and Reddit, as well as briefly outlining two video games, *Orwell* (2016) and *The Stanley Parable* (2013), which will be central

examples for immersion and reader involvement in Chapter 4. Providing an overview of these core examples has a number of benefits. One is to bring readers from different backgrounds onto the same page so as to enable them to follow the analyses fluently. Additionally, as has been pointed out before, anything that happens online might be fleeting. Platforms make changes to their policies, users can edit or delete their posts or comments or entire profiles, texts can become inaccessible – and all of that often happens unpredictably. Describing some of these texts and platforms here at least provides a snapshot of the field as-is, and supplies a basis for understanding the subsequent chapters even if the underlying primary works are modified or disappear at a later point.

The examples used in this study are only a small fraction of the texts that might possibly be analysed, and by no means constitute a digital canon. One thing that becomes painfully apparent in a cross-section of research on digital phenomena from the last thirty years is how unpredictable and swift change in the field is – otherwise, a longer-lasting canon would have emerged by now. The lack of such an established canon, which might have freed academics from the immediate burden of responsibility over selection, can also be liberating, as it enables a broader, less inhibited gaze. Attempts at canonisation at this point seem to me less promising than identifying trends and developments, and the examples used to that end in this study are primarily useful as illustrations and to test theoretical approaches.

Notes

1. I use “can be” because a text does not cease to be one only because it is spoken and listened to rather than being written and read, and a video game, apart from having a written source code, can still contain a narrative which can be analysed with methods of literary studies even if that narrative is transmitted multi-medially and experienced primarily audio-visually.
2. See e.g. Astrid Ensslin’s *Canonizing Hypertext*, which has an overall focus on education, but especially Chapter 5: “Hypertext in the Literature Classroom” (130ff); Chapter 7 in George Landow’s *Hypertext 3.0: “Reconfiguring Literary Education”* (272ff); Part Two of *Reading Moving Letters: “Teaching Digital Literature”* (Simanowski et al., eds. 230ff); or Gail McDonald’s “Hypertext and the Teaching of Modernist Difficulty”.
3. Studies on fanfiction include, among countless others, Henry Jenkins’ 1992 *Textual Poachers*, which proposes an “ethnographic account” (1) of productive fan groups; an overview provided by Bronwen Thomas (“What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things About It?”, 2011); Rebecca Black’s exploration of the role fanfiction can play in language learning (“Access and Affiliation”, 2005); Karen Hellekson’s papers on reciprocal gift exchanges (of artworks, writing, etc.) in fan communities (“A Fannish Field of Value”, 2009; “Making Use Of”, 2015); and a volume edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse with a broad topical range, including social dynamics in fanfiction contexts, form and genre conventions, and matters of crossing into other media (*Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, 2006).

4. That Genette points towards this in his 1987 work – which is not concerned with the digital at all, but rather very much with the physical artefact of the book – already indicates that this is not an issue that is original or unique to digital publications. A manuscript might not come with a set of system requirements, but it can still be lost.
5. The website for the excerpt published in the electronic supplement to the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Fiction* reads: “As of September 1997, this hypertext is known to be compatible with . . . Netscape Navigator 4.x on Windows 95, Windows NT, [classic] MacOS, and UNIX” (Joyce n.p.). All of these technologies have been outdated for well over a decade.