TEACHING ELECTRONIC LITERATURE:
METHODS AND INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

Cameron Lee Irby

Teaching Electronic Literature:
Methods and Integration

(Major Professor: Will Rogers, Ph.D.)

As technology continues its rapid advance, authors and artists across the globe have engineered creative and genre-breaking ways of mixing computers and electronic devices with traditional literary forms. This thesis provides an overview of electronic literature's history as an art form, an examination of major theorists and critics, an in-depth analysis of selected digital works, the results of my experimental electronic literature course, and a look at how this new narrative mode is being explored. While the findings in this thesis can apply to any university, I focus specifically on how public, regional universities like the University of Louisiana at Monroe can integrate electronic literature into its classes and culture.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The rise of consumer electronics, personal computers, and the Internet radically altered how the humanities are studied and have led to the rise of digital humanities fields and departments in regional, public universities along with other universities. This change continues to reverberate throughout universities like the University of Louisiana at Monroe as small, yet significant changes take place every year. One such inevitability, the introduction of electronic literature into the humanities, has been viewed with animosity and curiosity. To better prepare ULM and other regional, public universities for the arrival of electronic literature, this thesis discusses the history of electronic literature—from the pre-digital era to modern day—and some major critical works and theories of the genre. I also examined a collection of digital works, chosen for their accessibility, literary content, or impact on the electronic medium. Finally, I explored how electronic literature has been brought to classrooms, including a critical look back at one of my own attempts at doing so.

I understand that the moniker "electronic literature" is a bit ambitious. The very phrase can bring forth images of text on a dull, blue-white screen in a dark room or of a pretentious college student trying their hardest to be a part of the literary world. And, to be fair, it is only the latest in a long line of names for this odd mixture of computers and language; some prior ones include digital fiction, e-literature, and digital literature. To

prevent confusion, I will be using the phrase "electronic literature" throughout this thesis. Of course, this doesn't answer the question: "What is electronic literature?" The Electronic Literature Organization, a group that compiles these kinds of works to make them more readily accessible to potential readers, states that electronic literature is a "work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" (e-literature.org). Note that this classification rules out digitized texts since they do not utilize any of the unique qualities of computer technology.

Yet, this simplified definition is notably unclear. To summarize the whole of electronic literature in a single, solitary statement is impossible. N. Katherine Hayles, one of the leading scholars in the field, brings a very thorough discussion of the dual nature of electronic literature:

> …this definition raises questions about which capabilities and contexts of the computer are significant, directing attention not only toward the changing nature of computers but also the new and different ways in which the literary community mobilizes these capabilities. The definition… assumes pre-existing knowledge of what constitutes an "important literary aspect." … Readers come to digital work with expectations formed by print, including extensive and deep tacit knowledge of letter forms, print conventions, and print literary modes. Of necessity, electronic literature must build on these expectations even as it modifies and transforms them. … Electronic literature tests the boundaries of the literary and challenges us to re-think our assumptions of what literature can do and be. (Hayles 198-199)

Electronic literature is not the "next evolution" of literature. Print media has been our primary source of knowledge and communication for centuries, and this isn't changing anytime soon. The march of technology continues to bring forth curious intersections of humanity and machine, but books may never truly leave our cultural consciousness. There are artists and authors creating so-called works of the future, absent of paper and

ink and fueled by computers. But they got their inspiration, like so many others, from letters printed onto pages.

I would like to provide my own definition of what electronic literature is. But, I must start with what it is not. It is not a story typed up on Microsoft Word or pages of a book placed on a scanner to be uploaded as a PDF online. It is not the final nail that will seal away musty old books, convert libraries into pseudo-arcades, or relegate those who continue to write with pen and paper to some literary underground. It also isn't one specific art form, something that can be quickly identified by a core set of traits. It isn't something that everyone can access; just as many people cannot read or write, there will be those who have not or cannot learn how to use a computer or engage with a digital work. But what electronic literature *is* is a fusion of narrative and technology, an attempt to wire old tales and new explorations of the human condition into motherboards, software, or whatever technology the author has on hand. It is an attempt to bring the stories we want to tell into contact with people around the world in the fastest way possible. It is cyborg literature, digital fiction, electronic literature.

Now that I've established what electronic literature is, the next question is how to read it. Digital humanities could easily be its own thesis topic, as it encompasses the interdepartmental collaboration of traditional humanities and computer studies. Researchers under this banner seek to bring new ideas and theoretical approaches to English, History, Language studies, and other fields through the incorporation of the latest technology. One facet of DH is critical code studies, which considers the programming and construction of digital media to find unique quirks in the languages of HTML, C+, and more (Marino). Textual analysis, another example, can quickly analyze

texts to detect shifts in an author's voice or how a character is amplified through the author's writing style (Hoover).

There is one significant problem at the heart of digital humanities, and I am guilty of this crime as well. In our excitement to share our research, our electronic literature, and our articles, we forget that while these things may seem new to us, there are entire generations that find our work mundane. Ryan Cordell laments in his article "How Not to Teach Digital Humanities" how his giddiness was squashed when the syllabus for his Intro to digital humanities course was first rejected:

> My initial reaction was umbrage; I was certain my colleagues' technological reticence was clouding their judgment. But upon further reflection…I believe they were almost entirely right to reject that first proposal. ... We pair "digital" with "humanities" and feel we have something revolutionary, but for our undergraduate students the word "digital" is profoundly unimpressive. Their music is digital. Their television is digital. Many of their books and school materials are and have always been digital. To brag that *our* humanities (or our liberal arts) are digital is to proclaim that we have met a base requirement for modern communication. It would be like your bank crowing that you can check your account online. Of course you can. At this point, you would only notice if you could not do so. (para 5, 24)

We praise ourselves for "discovering" things that for many are simply part of modern life. Members of my own family have grown up without ever knowing what life without the Internet was like. By the time we think that we've found some hidden gem and write a book about it, that would may have already circulated around the globe, its story consumed by billions of Internet savvy individuals. When we finally work out a spot for that work in our packed syllabi, we will find that up to half of the class had already read it, examined its themes, and delved into the code to learn how it was constructed. This is the kind of literary analysis that many professors would dream their undergraduates

would do for all the assigned readings, but for we who are so eager to share our shiny new toys with the world, it can be the most devastating thing to hear.

I, too, started with this zealous, blind fire, and I have burned myself out many times. Thankfully, those that I have worked with in the past taught me a very important lesson: one must read themselves as critically as they do the works they read. To legitimize electronic literature, as with the digital humanities in general, the subject of our research should not be on why *we* should be taken seriously; instead, we must prove ourselves by proposing research that demonstrates our legitimacy.

Considering this, Chapter Two of this thesis summarizes some of the major contributions to the field of electronic literature studies so far. Of note, I discuss everything from the first texts built from the Storyspace program developed by Michael Joyce, Jay David Bolter, and John B. Smith in 1987 to modern endeavors like the virtual reality experience *JoyceStick*. This section also includes a technological history, detailing how early computers provided both fresh ground and unexpected restrictions for experimentation and how the expanding complexity of electronic literature mirrors the rapid advances in computing over the past thirty years. This chapter also includes elaborations of key terms, styles, and genres within the art form and provides clarifications where necessary.

Chapter Three focuses on how literary criticism can be applied to electronic literature. To illustrate this, I offer deep readings of texts of various electronic and literary styles such as Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*; the works of Young Hae-Chang and Marc Voge's joint project "Young Hae-Chang Heavy Industries"; and Davey Wreden's *The Stanley Parable*. Each text is dissected and categorized by how they utilize the

electronic medium, their literary density, and the interaction between the text, the computer, and the reader. By doing so, the texts prove themselves suitable matches for the literary categories they seek to enter.

Finally, Chapter Four delivers a framework for educators who wish to weave electronic literature into English classes. I focus specifically on English classes due to my own experiences teaching a 4000-level English course on electronic literature at ULM and to my lack of experience in other fields. Like Cordell, I also discuss what didn’t work within the class and what can be learned from those mistakes. In addition, I expound the current difficulties of teaching electronic literature at regional, public universities. Other courses in similar universities are brought up as comparisons to my own, and additional resources for aspiring educators are listed. Through these examples, I hope to illustrate how electronic literature can be brought to a public, regional university easily and affordably.

CHAPTER 2

A History of Electronic Literature

> *Literature, conceptualized not just as print books but as the entire complex system of literary production—including writers, editors, publishers, critics, designers, programmers, booksellers, readers, players, teachers, copyright laws and other legal formation, websites and other electronic dissemination mechanisms, and the technologies that enable and instantiate all of the above—is permeated at every level by computation. (Hayles, Electronic Literature, 85)*

The Pre-Digital World

A curious mix of writers, poets, chess grandmasters, and mathematicians gathered on a frigid December day in Paris in 1960. They dubbed themselves *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, but the world would eventually know them as "Oulipo," a collective dedicated to exploring the possibilities of math and literature. But, as David Bellos writes in his exploration of the group, "The Oulipo did not gather over their long lunch meetings to talk about what literature could do for mathematics. They talked about what *mathematics* could do for *literature*" (105, emphasis mine). Starting with only a dozen members, the Oulipo sought "potential" literature, works that could be created through technical or mechanical means.

The most famous of this tribe is Raymond Queneau, who authored the aptly titled *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, or *One hundred billion poems* in 1959. Queneau effectively wrote 14 sonnets according to a strict rule set and cut each line out, allowing them to be folded back to reveal other lines. Running the numbers, 14 first lines multiplied by 14 second lines multiplied by 14 third lines, and so on, leads to 10^{14} or

100,000,000,000,000 sonnets within a single book. To quote Roland Barthes, "[T]he author enters into his own death," as Queneau's work can form more poems in one tome than can be read by a single person in a lifetime (1322). The poems are not Queneau's, as he did not craft one line to fit the next or the one before it. He engineered the process, thus disconnecting himself from all scrutiny within the work. While many have attempted to analyze the poems for their deeper truths and the fragments of the poet's mind, as we do with any literary format, the irony is that "any kind of established critical approach to a poem generated by the combination game becomes a parody not of the poem, but of the method," not because the poems are nonsensical or reach, as one critic scoffed, "the limits of intelligibility;" rather, the work would have to be read in full or, at the very least, half-read to develop a well-executed critique (Bellos 108, qt. in Funkhouser 34). Since there is no conceivable way for any one person to read the whole work, attempting to completely grasp *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* will only reflect the critic's own ideas back at them.

Another Oulipo technique that outlived the group was the *S + 7* mode. Popularized by Jean Lescure, another of the founding members, one would take a substantive noun (*S*) from a poem and replace it with one that was seven nouns below it in the dictionary ("S+7"). In many cases, this tactic will yield surreal and outrageous results. For example, the first line of Maggie Smith's "Good Bones" ("Life is short, though I keep this from my children.") becomes "Lifetime is short, though I keep this from my chimeras" (131, ln 1). This conversion still resembles the initial sentiment of Smith's poem, but thinking of children as chimeras formed from combining two

individual's DNA into a single entity frames the reproductive process as an alchemical process, using the tools of science and the wonder of magic to create new life.

The Oulipo were not the first to question and play with form, language, and spontaneous literature. Dadaism, a proto-post-modernist and Marxist movement, popped up soon after World War I as a reaction to the stale world around them. Instead of attempting to "make sense," Dadaism created "'word salad' containing obscene expressions and every imaginable kind of linguistic refuse" and "guaranteed a quite vehement distraction by making artworks the center of a scandal" (Benjamin 1067, 68). Dadaist visual poetry, sound poetry, and art pieces appear to be a mishmash of words, images, and sounds, and they often evoked a sense of awe at the chaos and confusion at the purpose. Cut-up poetry, for example, was made by taking bits of newspaper articles and headlines and splicing them all together. Mark Hutchinson provides this explanation of Dadaism: "Dada did not attempt to introduce something new into culture but to destroy culture in order to make way for the radically new. … To be Dada was to be against art" (123, 124).

The Dada movement soon gave way to the Surrealists. The year 1924 saw the publication of Andre Breton's "Surrealist Manifesto," which proclaimed, "We are still living under the reign of logic" (para. 14). Surrealism attempted to distance themselves from their work through even more chaotic methods than the Dadaists and Oulipo. One such technique was automatic writing, where the author would attempt to create a work with their subconscious mind while in a hypnotic state. The works produced may or may not make sense, but the point was to have a work that was completely new and

uninfluenced by the forms, structure, or criticism established by Romanticists and Modernists.

As evidenced by the Dada, the surrealists, and the Oulipo, there was a desire then to separate literature and art from societal constraints. From the Dadaist's deconstruction of the bourgeoisie, Surrealism's disconnection of literature and logic, to Oulipo's marriage of mathematics and literature, authors and artists aimed to make art and poetry feel new again, which is what all poets long for.

When the Machines Became Poets

In 1959, as all of these ideas were floating around the cultural consciousness, Theo Lutz sat down at a ZUSE Z22 computer, a bulky machine that ran on hole-punched tape and took up an entire room. According to C.T. Funkhouser's *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995*, Lutz was the first to create a digital poem by feeding this electronic monolith phrases and names from *The Castle* by Franz Kafka, creating this poem:

DER GRAF DER FREMDE DER BLICK DIE KIRCHE
DAS SCHLOSS DAS BILD DAS AUGE DAS DORF
DER TURM DER BAUER DER WEG DER GAST
DER TAG DAS HAUS DER TISCH DER KNECHT
OFFEN STILL STARK GUT SCHMAL NAH NEU
LEISE FERN TIEF SPAET DUNKEL FREI
GROSS ALT WÜTEND

(Not every look is near. No village is late.
A Castle is free and every farmer is distant.
Every stranger is distant. A day is late.
Every house is dark. An eye is deep.
Not every castle is old. Every day is old.
Not every guest is furious. A church is narrow.
No house is open and not every church is quiet.

Not every eye is furious. No look is new.)
(*Prehistoric Digital Poetry* 37)

This poem is certainly not revolutionary in its style or wit, and some would even scoff that the whole thing is nonsense spewed out by a contraption that can't think for itself. And while this is true—I doubt the Z22 cared about Kafka's work at all—the fact is that a poem was generated without the intervention of a human. Where Oulipo used humans to make the math, the Z22, once activated, compiled and generated something resembling a poem, no author required. But is it, really, a poem? Can a computer, if fed enough poetic works, make its own art absent of influence? Before answering, consider how many poems a poet might read before feeling "inspired" and how often their influences are considered their strengths.

Regardless of if the Z22 was a poet, other researchers and poets clamored to test the literary potential of computers. In 1962, a machine dubbed "Auto-Beatnik" had its poems published in *Horizon Magazine* and in the November issue of *Time*. Auto-Beatnik was developed by R.M. Worthy, who was "concerned with the problem of effective communication with machines in simple English" ("Auto-Beatnik," para. 2). The device had a limited vocabulary from all the poems it was fed (only 3,500 words), but the poems continued to resemble poetry:

Rose

Few fingers go like narrow laughs.
An ear won't keep new fishes,
Who is that rose in that blind house?
And all slim, gracious blind planes are
coming,
They cry badly along a rose,
To leap is stuffy, to craw was tender. (qtd. in *Prehistoric Digital Poetry* 42-43)

Show this poem to a bystander, and they would most likely agree that this poem was written by a human. As for what it means, that might be a little harder to decipher, which isn't new by any means. The "rose in that blind house" could indicate a good person locked within a family or situation that isolates them. But, what are the "blind planes" that "Cry badly along a rose"? Are they suitors, friends, or something else? Like the Z22, Auto-Beatnik cannot answer. They are unable to, constrained by their programming to respond only to the correct set of inputs. The efforts of Z22 and Auto-Beatnik could be disqualified on the basis that they do not understand what they are writing. But, Funkhouser elaborates, "Action, description, question, projection, and judgement—all poetic traits—are present" (43). Whether the "poets" can tell us what they mean might be irrelevant. If a rose is created from its most basic elements, each strand of DNA crafted by a machine and combined into a flower, is it still a rose, and would it smell as sweet to the bees? If a computer takes a collection of words, organizes them into what it considers the poetic form, and edits it just so, would it be a poem? If it isn't a poem, then what is it?

Epsen Aarseth, the author of *Cybertext*, proposes a hybrid solution: the poet is a cyborg. Rather than imagining that the machine as the poet, the poetry produced by Z22, Auto-Beatnik, and others is "a product of human activity that merely *poses* as the product of the machine" (Aarseth 134). The poets are therefore still human. The author of "Rose" is R.M. Worthy, and Auto-Beatnik is no different from techniques of the Oulipo; it uses complex mathematical equations to create literature. Granted, the math is being calculated faster than most people can possibly fathom, but the machine is only an extension of the poet's will. In the end, it is the poet that publishes the poem, not the computer that helped to write it.

Computers in the Home

It should be also noted that both the Z22 and Auto-Beatnik were products of scientists and engineers trying to communicate with machines; the poetry was a byproduct of that process. Personal computers made for an individual's use did not arrive until 1971's Kenbak-1, which sold a grand total of 40 devices ("What Was the First PC?"). Computers were massive, required a lot of energy, and had few practical uses outside of the workplace. However, there was a growing following of people interested in them, leading to numerous do-it-yourself minicomputer kits.

The Apple I was one such kit. Sold by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, the computer sat in wooden frames and had a bare board with no keys to press. While they found some success, the computer's integration into the home did not occur until the release of the Apple II in 1977. The combination of a significantly lower cost system and the shift from command line to a graphical interface helped make computing accessible to all ages and all professions. The publication of word processing and video editing programs sparked creative minds, who rushed to toy with these new systems. By the end of the 70s, the world began to go truly digital as computer networks such as ARPAnet were beginning to link together, connecting users with one another at speeds never seen.

"Click (yes) to Start": Hypertext Fiction

In December 1986, Judy Malloy started uploading database files to the Art Com Electronic Network, a section of the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectric Link). These three files, known collectively as *Uncle Roger*, became the first work of hypertext to be sold commercially. Hypertext refers to inserting hyperlinks into texts, allowing a reader to

jump from one section of a document, website, or database to another. Websites use hypertext all the time, often posting links to previous articles in a series or supplemental information that opens in a new browser window. Hypertext fiction is made up of segments called "lexias." Each lexia can contain as much text as the author desires in addition to various images and sounds. The author then links the lexias together however they see fit. In the simplest cases, the reader only needs to click a "Forward" or "Back" button to progress through the story. Other authors weave the links into, as Michael Joyce calls them in *afternoon, a story*, "words that yield." Tying a specific lexia to a single word ties additional emphasis on that word, which encourages the reader to seek out prominent words within the lexias to find more of the story. While this system of locks and doors only has two core elements, the stories created with them can become wildly convoluted, sending readers to regions visited by few and trapping others in endless loops with no clear escape. Malloy herself describes such works as "a pool of information into which the reader plunges repeatedly, emerging with a cumulative and individual picture" ("'Uncle Roger,' an Online Narrabase," 195). Not all readers will read the whole story, but that will only encourage them to take the plunge again.

While Malloy established the basics of the hypertext genre, its spike in popularity did not occur for some time. This was due to the incomprehensible difficulty of creating such works. Authors like Malloy had to write most of the programming themselves. Imagine an artist having to craft a pencil and construct a piece of paper every time they desired to make a sketch. In 1987, Michael Joyce, Jay David Bolter, and John B. Smith created the Storyspace program, which offered future hypertext writers a platform to make their works. To demonstrate, Joyce published *afternoon, a story*, which gained

massive success and praise. Eastgate Systems then picked up both Storyspace and *afternoon* and begin publishing them in 1990. The company later published the other two major hypertexts of the 90s: Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* in 1992 and *Patchwork Girl*, written by Shelley Jackson in 1995.

For a time, it seemed like the future had come. Robert Coover wrote in the provocatively titled 1992 article "The End of Books," "Fluidity, contingency, indeterminacy, plurality, discontinuity are the hypertext buzzwords of the day, and they seem to be fast becoming principles, in the same way that relativity not so long ago displaced the falling apple" (para. 28). Hypertext fiction was a post-modernist dream. But, it became quickly obvious that the art form was still cumbersome for both readers and authors. Silvio Gaggi notes that "although the reader's ability to make choices *seems* to indicate control and empowerment, that empowerment may be specious. …[T]he possibility of having to make decisions without sufficient information regarding where any choice may lead can result in a disorientation that precludes meaningful freedom" (105, original emphasis). Marie-Laure Ryan witnesses first hand this paralyzing "freedom" in her book *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, providing this example in her examination of Joyce's *Twelve Blue*:

> Right from the beginning I face a dilemma: Should I read for the plot (or whatever semblance of plot the text might offer—my acquaintance with Joyce puts a damper on my hopes of finding a well-made, stable story)? Or should I first try to reconstitute the map and the logic of the linking? The strategies appropriate to each goal differ: if I read for the plot I will favor a "depth-first" exploration, venturing further and further along the chains of links, while if I read for the map I will go "breadth-first," performing backtracking operations to try all the paths that lead out of a given node. (Ryan 228)

While authors spend hours forming a web of links for the readers to traverse, the authors leave the construction of the work's structure to the reader. The expectation is that the

reader will go into the work and, as Malloy described earlier, emerge with an image of the whole. Ryan's hesitation, on the other hand, reveals that readers, when given too many choices that ultimately determine how they are to read a work, struggle to concentrate on the story being told; the focus is removed from reading the work because we get frustrated when we can't find the right door or key to get to the lexia that contains the information we want. Print literature, meanwhile, only requires that we remember where we left off when we open the book to read. The narrative may be just as jumbled as a hypertext, but at least the pages are numbered for our convenience.

My metaphor of "doors" and "keys" may bring forth memories of video games, notably titles like *The Legend of Zelda*, where players need to find keys to move through the dungeons. This is not exactly unwarranted. Joyce and Bolter admit that, when they created Storyspace, "Interactive fiction has already existed for some time in the form of computerized adventure games. … Even the simplest of these games is a fictional hypertext. For the computer is presenting the player with a text, and the player's job is to understand and respond to that text" ("Hypertext and Creative Writing," 41, 42). Ryan also brings up how she inevitably tried to "beat the text" and focused on finding "the hidden treasure at the center of the labyrinth" (238). The game-like qualities of hypertext fiction have led many contemporary authors to just incorporate actual games into their work. Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest* is an excellent example of this, using a "personality quiz" format to tell a thoughtful and serious story about the effects of depression and society's misunderstandings of it. And this only concerns fictions that continue the appearance of the hypertext works. Some authors have turned the lexias into 3D rooms for readers to interact with, such as with titles like *Gone Home*—an exploration of the

Greenbriar family mansion and of the residents that have vanished—and *Joycestick*, a reimagining of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in virtual reality. These new works direct readers toward the author's story more than the older hypertext fictions while still maintaining the pleasure of digging through all the nooks and crannies for content that was stashed away, reserved for the most intrepid of readers.

Foundational Electronic Literature Theories

Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature

The gaming aspect of hypertext were not lost on Epsen Aarseth, author of the 1997 book *Cybertext*. One of the cornerstone works of electronic literature criticism, *Cybertext* discusses what Aarseth dubs "ergodic literature" (from the Greek *ergon* = work, *hodos* = path) (1). Ergodic literature acts as a sort of labyrinth "in which the reader can explore at will, get lost, discover secret paths, play around, follow the rules, and so on" (3). *Non*ergodic literature, in Aarseth's view, requires little more than turning a page: "…the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities" (1). This broader term attempts to bring cybertext—not just hypertext, but all forms of electronic literature—into conversation with older analog works such as the ancient Chinese text *I Ching*, Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, and Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poémes*, a task that Aarseth hoped would allow academia to accept this growing field of literature.

As television offered an alternative to cinema and literature, cybertext was a proposed marriage of media, bringing the engaging and thought-provoking stories of literature in contact with the constantly-shifting visual arts. While hypertext had some champions, Aarseth includes computer games in his definition of electronic texts and

elaborates at length on their potential value: “Although trivialists are right—adventure games will never become good novels—they are also making an irrelevant point, because adventure games are not novels at all. The adventure game is an artistic genre of its own, a unique aesthetic field of possibilities, which must be judged on its own terms” (106-107). Aarseth does admit that adventure games, Multi-User Dungeons (a predecessor to the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games of today), and many other computer games are not as literary as, say, *The Canterbury Tales* or *The Illiad*, but the ideas and methods that go into their creation are more than capable of generating a true rival.

There are criticisms to be made towards Aarseth’s method. He frequently complains that his diction and word choice may not be the best descriptions for what he wants to say, an understandable dilemma when the field one is studying has no standard vocabulary (2). He attempts to add many new terms like “ergodic literature” into academia, but few of them have found use in the decades since. Readers who choose Aarseth to begin their studies may also be put off by Aarseth’s heavy emphasis on data and proving the literary qualities of electronic literature through scientific means. Despite this, the data he provides grants a welcome perspective on the intersections of print literature and its electronic “successor.” One notable example is his comparison of ten physical works of literature, including *Moby Dick* and *Cent mille milliards de poémes,* to ten electronic texts. Through statistical analysis, Aarseth determined that while some electronic forms, like Multi-User Dungeons, appear to be vastly different from traditional literature, most of these forms overlap with their print counterparts (70). Aarseth establishes that “[a]ny text directs its user, by convention, mechanism, or social interaction. The reader is (and has always been) a necessary part of the text.” (74).

Electronic texts may offer more for the reader to *do* compared to many print texts, hence his title of “ergodic” literature, but, Aarseth stresses, “[N]ew media do not appear in opposition to the old but as emulators of features and functions that are already invented” (74). Computer technology merely provides a new way of demonstrating this.

Hamlet on the Holodeck

Where Aarseth uses logic, charts, and graphs in his argument to prove his points, Janet Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (released in the same year as *Cybertext*) uses *literary* techniques to examine the worth of what was already available and how it could improve. Murray proclaims the computer as “the child of print culture, a result of the five centuries of organized, collective inquiry and invention that the printing press made possible” and believes that “[i]f digital art reaches the same level of expressiveness as these older media, we will no longer concern ourselves with how we are receiving the information. We will only think about what truth it has told us about our lives” like any literary work (8, 26). She then divides the draw and power of electronic literature into three distinct factors—immersion, agency, and transformation—and explains how these properties have been used in print for centuries.

Her discussion of immersion, for example, begins with *Don Quixote* and a reminder that many have tried to warn us of the dangers of literature. She writes,

> A stirring narrative in any medium can be experienced as a virtual reality because our brains are programmed to tune into stories with an intensity that can obliterate the world around us. This siren power of narrative is what made Plato distrust the poets as a threat to the Republic. It is what made Cervantes’ contemporaries fear the new fad of silent reading. It is what made the advent of movies and television so frightening to the dystopian writers of the twentieth century. (Murray 98)

Literature has often played with the boundaries of reality, acutely aware that readers open books with a half-hearted desire to be pulled into the ocean of words within, and authors play with the form to both entrance the reader and break them from said trance. *Don Quixote* has the titular knight ask the "readers" for their opinions, talking to people *in* the book about the book itself. *Frankenstein* is composed of a series of letters, imploring their "recipient" to believe everything written within. *Tristram Shandy* has blank pages in the middle of the book. The immersion of the reader within each book is broken and unbroken not because the reader can suspend their disbelief but, as Murray claims, "we actively *create belief*" (110, original emphasis). We do this because "[w]e bring our own cognitive, cultural, and psychological templates to every story as we assess the characters and anticipate the way the story is likely to go" (110).

Agency refers to the reader/player's ability to interact with the text and influence the direction of the narrative. Murray distinguishes between interactivity and agency by using games of chance as an example: "The players' actions have *effect*, but the actions are not chosen and the effects are *not related to the players' intentions*" (128, my emphasis). Joyce's *afternoon* and other hypertext fictions would likely not have the following they do if readers were sent to random pages instead of ones connected by linguistic threads. Like Aarseth, Murray gestures toward up the labyrinth motif, adding that electronic literature "is like a treasure hunt in which a chain of discoveries acts as a kind of Ariadne's thread to lead you through the maze to the treasure at the center" (131). However, not every text needs a literary jewel at the end to attract readers; the journey itself can be the reward.

If agency is how the reader can act and react to the world around them, then transformation is what changes within the text and the reader. Murray does warn that "computer enactment may also enforce violent or antisocial behaviors. …[L]iteral wish-fulfilment fantasies would not help a person cope with the actual situation" (172). However, she remarks, "The goal of mature fictional environments should not be to exclude antisocial material but to include it in a form in which it can be engaged, remodeled, and worked through," adding that a virtual world in which we can befriend and work alongside dragons is preferable to one in which they are only enemies to be slain (173). By placing readers into a role they do not yet understand (i.e. a father whose child has cancer, a woman searching for love online, a hero who must choose to save their lover or the world and not both), these crossroads reveal hidden biases, dredge up things long forgotten, and enhance the lessons learned through action.

N. Katherine Hayles

Perhaps the best-known theorist of electronic literature, N. Katherine Hayles has written many books of criticism. A chapter from her 1999 text *How We Became Posthuman* can be even found in the second edition of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, a signal that electronic literature is slowly being accepted into academia. Her article titled "Electronic Literature: What is it?", published online by the Electronic Literature Organization in 2007, has been printed and revised many times, such as in the first chapter of her 2008 book *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Here, she distinguishes several genres from hypertext to interactive fictions while emphasizing what makes them all literary works.

One fact that cannot be ignored is that electronic texts are multi-layered. There are the things the reader sees when s/he pushes a button on the keyboard to make the computer write the word "kumquat," and there is the hidden code that transforms the press of a button into data the computer can recognize, interpret, re-display as the word "kumquat." Hayles defines this interplay between man and machine as *intermediation*. Print literature requires the reader to conjure up the worlds written in text within their minds, but, as Hayles writes, "The computer, by contrast, operates through commands often concealed from a user's direct inspection and that consequently must be intuited through the computer's performance" (154-155). The additional digital layer complicates electronic literature studies in both an exciting and infuriating way.

Consider this scenario: a reader is playing *Spec Ops: The Line*, a video game adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. During the concluding chapter, where the player must decide to continue their atrocities of war or attempt to atone, the game crashes, returning the reader to the desktop. They load it again, and the same thing happens. A quick search online would reveal that this is not *supposed* to happen. The work could be installed incorrectly, the computer might have faulty components, and many other things could have caused this issue. That does not stop the fact that it *did* happen, and the player will have an experience with the text that many others will not have because of the computer's (admittedly poor) intermediation between the reader and the work, perhaps reflecting on the atrocities of war can lead to psychological trauma as a result. Hayles confirms this, stating that in our modern day, "All communication, save for direct, face-to-face conversation, is aided or enabled by code" and that "[c]omputation is not peripheral or incidental to electronic literature but central to its performance, play,

and interpretation” (132, 44). How we read a text and experience our daily lives are directly affected by the technology we use.

Who Knows What the Future Holds?

On June 29, 2007, the first iPhone was released to the public. Quickly becoming a top seller and spawning numerous copycat products and updated models, the Apple smartphone removed the technological barrier to entry for many. Like how the Apple II brought personal computers into the lives of many, the iPhone and other smartphones fit devices thousands of times more powerful than Lutz’s Z22 into our pockets. These machines can listen to our voices, hear words, and respond to us. Tapping the screen a half-dozen times give us access to friends and strangers all over the world.

Virtual reality headsets herald the promise of true immersion. Programs are beginning to learn our habits and adjust as a response to them. Social media is quickly becoming our preferred method of communication (for better or worse) as we garner our news from Reddit, talk to our families about events through Twitter, and remind friends about upcoming dates on Facebook. Small, independent works like *Undertale* and *Night in the Woods* can go from being relative unknowns to overnight must-reads through the sheer voracity of Internet fame. Electronic literature will continue flourish as more inventive, creative, and gifted authors and programmers take advantage of the software and hardware that run our digitally-enhanced world.

CHAPTER 3

An Example Canon

> *Most of the writing we encounter in our everyday lives essentially holds straight forward information. Thus the concept of literature customarily presents itself as an expressive form containing larger meanings, as something we expect to take time to become absorbed in, perhaps in search of discovering something we're unable to see ourselves. (Funkhouser,* New Directions*, 24)*

Summary

The works explored in this chapter offer varying similarities to traditional literature. Some tell their story through text alone while others integrate audio-visual media. What lies at their core is what Funkhouser mentions above: the need to show us something about ourselves that we have not yet noticed, that we have forgotten, or that we have kept hidden. Their individual effectiveness at doing so is debatable, but this is true of any work of literature. Some works return to the public consciousness through the years as new interpretations and adaptations revitalize the conversation around them, while others gather dust on a shelf or take up three megabytes of memory on a hard drive.

Each of the following works have two analyses. First, I explore the works, highlighting their major themes, literary qualities, and their interactions with the electronic media they inhabit. Second, I discuss how to integrate these works into classrooms, providing suggestions for instruction and additional context as needed.

afternoon, a story **– Michael Joyce**

Once the story of *afternoon* begins, we encounter this quandary: "< Poetry > she says, without emotion, one way or another… Do you want to hear about it?" (Joyce,

[begin]). Peter, a poet and our protagonist, offers the reader a choice. Choosing “Yes” moves the story in one direction; selecting “No” has Peter reply, “I understand how you feel,” before taking the reader elsewhere ([no]). Both paths have their own branches and offshoots that wrap around each other, leading the reader to far-off tangents, in circles that seem endless, and into the minds of other characters. At some point, Peter admits, “I want to say that I may have seen my son die this morning” ([I want to say]). This sentence is a thread that connects the hundreds of lexias together into a cohesive story.

That said, readers who read patiently and hunt an ending to *afternoon* chase a futile dream. There is no conclusion in the traditional sense. *afternoon* loops back around to pages we’ve already read, areas we’ve traversed countless times in our search for “words that yield.” In a lexia titled [work in progress], a third party (presumably Joyce himself) muses,

> Closure is, as in any fiction, a suspect quality, although here it is made manifest. When the story no longer progresses, or when it cycles, or when you tire of the paths, the experience of reading it ends. Even so, there are likely to be more opportunities than you think there are at first. A word which doesn’t yield the first time you read a section may take you elsewhere if you choose it when you encounter the section again; and sometimes what seems a loop, like memory, heads off again in another direction.
>
> There is no simple way to say this. ([work in progress])

Joyce does not give a timeline of events, a revelation that places each piece of the story into the correct perspective, or any singular lexia that could be an “ending” here. [work in progress] is an invitation to dig deeper, to examine every route and every possible combination of events until at best we are satisfied or, at worst, too frustrated to continue. Aarseth seconds this notion: “Instead of asking, What have I read? the critic might become preoccupied with the question, *Have I read all?* and come to identify the task of

interpretation as a task of territorial exploration and technological mastery" (Aarseth 87, my emphasis). Just as we will go through life unable to experience everything, readers must acknowledge that there will be some parts of *afternoon* (or any text, for that matter) that they will miss.

Like the reader, Peter struggles to find everything. We search with him through the city for clues, memories, and answers to find out if his son still lives or not. The obvious answer, of course, would be for him to go back to the scene of the car crash his son and ex-wife may have been involved in and confirm his suspicions. His employer, Wert, asks this very plainly, "<Why didn't you just turn your car around and see if it was them, instead of worrying yourself to death?>" to which Peter responds, "<I was afraid to see.>" (Joyce, [Whom]). He is trapped in denial, avoiding the answer to the question to escape the pain of loss that could occur. In a discussion with Wert's wife Lolly, he admits, "< I am so afraid of what I will do, how I will feel, if it is true. And then I begin to feel guilty. I mean, I start to think that part of me doesn't really care, part of me would be relieved… in a way, that is, if they…>" ([storm-tossed]). From here, the story begins another cycle. *afternoon*, therefore, mirrors Peter's circular search for a comforting truth he cannot find. The fate of Peter's son and ex-wife is left unknown because Peter cannot come to terms with his own emotions. He cannot accept the truth, so he searches eternally.

Another prominent theme is that of anxiety provoked by modern society's reliance on computers. Although he fancies himself a poet, Peter's day job is using his literary techniques to sell insurance and promote a new artificial intelligence, Datacom. As Amazon's Alexa and other digital assistants are quickly becoming commonplace in

our time, Peter reflects the paranoia of the 80s when films like *The Terminator* and *Blade Runner* showcased dystopian futures where tech consumes every portion of human life. In a later sequence, Datacom calls a local hospital in search of Peter's family. While the scene's first appearance is comical as the nurses giggle over how un-human the machine sounds—"'Fran, you ought to hear this. There's a computer calling here for patient information.'"—the second, third, and other times the reader encounters this recalls our modern issue of robocalling and how quickly technology has evolved in the thirty years since *afternoon*'s publication ([no, I say]). There is also another lexia that seems to be gated by a password, perhaps to visualize how technology can frustrate users and store away important information from the world, but I have yet to figure out how to proceed nor have I found anyone else who has. There is a distinct chance that there is nothing behind the password screen, but then again, maybe the answers we seek open to those who know the code.

The difficulty of teaching *afternoon* may be off-putting to educators. Reading the work is simple enough, and most students will quickly learn how to navigate the work. The problem is that Joyce crafted *afternoon* to be an experience, with emphasis on evoking a feeling of circuitous motion or running on a treadmill over that of "finishing" the text. Each student will enter class having read a wildly different version of *afternoon* than everyone else. One may have stopped reading after arriving at [begin] for the third time, convinced that they had seen all they needed to. Another could very likely see dozens of lexias that no one in the class came across while somehow never encountering [I want to say] or [storm-tossed]. Like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Michael Joyce's *afternoon* drops students into Dublin and tells them to run off and have fun, rarely providing

directions save that of “keep going.” Everyone who reads *Ulysses* will have read the same story in the same order, like a guided tour. While we the tourists will undoubtedly take notice of differing aspects of the landscape, the architecture, the language, or the characters and jot down our own reactions to those things, when we compare our notes, we will have the collective understanding that we journeyed together. *afternoon* does not provide that certainty.

There is also the notable issue of distribution and accessibility. *afternoon* was included in the Norton anthology *Postmodern American Fiction* in 1997 that could be read online through a web browser. The web version Norton used is now broken and can no longer be read past the introductory screen, and there are no current plans for a new edition of the anthology. Eastgate continues to be the only distributor of *afternoon*, and the $25 USB drive that contains the work requires a Mac OS computer. Not every university will have Apple computers on hand to run the program, and many students (including myself) will spend just as much time figuring out how to work with the operating system if they are daily Windows users. The lack of available platforms to read the text hinders its potential use in classrooms.

If a professor somehow received a class that all had Apple computers on hand and could easily afford the latest version of *afternoon,* this text will work best with a smaller classroom between ten to fifteen students as well as one of a 3000- or 4000-level course since this would give undergraduates time to develop their critical thinking skills and establish some knowledge of literary theories like postmodernism, deconstructionism, and reader-response theory. The smaller class size will encourage more students to

interact with one another and make the prospect of a class-wide discussion of *afternoon* viable.

afternoon would require two readings, at a minimum. The first assigned reading would focus on exploration. Let the students traverse the hypertext on their own, and then ask questions about their experience. What sections confused them, and which ones enthralled them? What is the fate of Peter's family, and is Peter somehow responsible? What are some other important themes and characters? Use these questions to guide the discussion, but the students should be the ones driving the class for the day. Those that dug deep into the text will have much more to say, but there will still be a delightful moment where the student who read the least came across a lexia no one else had. I see this first lesson like a murder mystery, as everyone contributes evidence for their view of the events and defends against accusations and conflicting stories.

The second reading should focus on reading as much as possible. Perhaps a quiz of esoteric knowledge, including things like lexia titles, character names, which sections are spoken by what characters, and other details, would convince students to band together and explore *afternoon*'s many byways and branching paths. The trick, of course, is to make the test impossible to ace, proving how obnoxiously detailed *afternoon* is. The grade shouldn't count against the students, though it would be a decent bonus point opportunity. The test is to emphasize the re-readability of the work and how different traversals will yield new results. After the test, continue the previous discussion but have the students include the new information they found.

I would recommend *afternoon* more if it were more readily available to students and educators, if only for its historical and literary contexts. While not the first hypertext

nor the first work of electronic literature, Joyce helped bring hypertext fiction into the mainstream discussion in a time before the Internet ever existed. *afternoon* also adds some context about how suddenly computers became a part of our daily lives. Until the work is easier to read, Joyce's *afternoon* will have to wait for another day.

"The Art of Sleep" and "The Art of Silence" – Young Hae-Chang Heavy Industries

The cacophony that is the works of Young Hae-Chang and Marc Voge is hard to parse. Their art can be described as "word films" that flash fragments of sentences and thoughts onto the computer screen, accompanied by a jazz soundtrack and, occasionally, text-to-speech voices. Based in Seoul, South Korea, the duo has gained global notoriety through their craft, which they have translated into multiple languages. Some of the works are impossible to grasp completely without a multicultural view. For example, "Nippon" tells two sides of the same story simultaneously with one in English and one in Japanese. While most people would be unable to break past the dual-language barrier posed in that work, Young Hae-Chang Heavy Industries have around 100 other works posted on their website. One of those works, "The Art of Sleep," was commissioned by Tate, a UK museum collective, which asked Chang and Voge to discuss the broader issues of art and the art world in a piece that was shown at the Frieze Art Fair in 2006.

The narrator, who could either be Voge or Chang, begins by quietly announcing, "Eureka. No exclamation point. It's too late at night for exclamations and celebrations" ("Art of Sleep"). Their insomnia, caused by both coffee and the barking of the neighbor's dog, implants an existentialist truth: "Everything is unnecessary. Everything is futile. … *Every goddamn thing is futile*" (original emphasis). After all, why bother paying rent and

saving a sinking Venice when the sun will inevitably go dark, leaving the remnants of humanity (if there are any) without warmth? And so, the narrator argues:

> If all this is futile, then art is futile, too. *Art is futile*. I mean, Art is part of everything, right? Or am I wrong, and in some critically theoretical way, art is different? An exception to the law of every little thing? The answer to all our problems? The way to stop global warming? To cure cancer? Rubbish. Art is just like everything else. Art is just as futile as everything. Even more so. In fact, art is necessarily futile. Everyone knows that. Art is in essence more futile than everything else. Art *is* futility itself. Art is the gold standard of futility. That's its beauty. ("Art of Sleep")

While some might attribute futility to worthlessness, the narrator is quick to reply that of course art is important. The point they are trying to make is simply, "Art is everything."

Around this point, the narrator starts getting sidetracked, listing all the foods and other things that are also art, imagining different fatal, yet artistic ends for the neighbor's dog, and wandering into a discussion of the ideas and stories of the surrealists Andre Breton and Marcel Duchamp. By the end of the film, the narrator completely forgets what they had been talking about, too exhausted to remember what revelation had kept them up all night long.

In one way, the narrator voices a postmodernist viewpoint that, to some, has become cliché. Art has no inherent meaning; therefore, anything can be art. Many artists have tried to reconcile this. Duchamp famously submitted a urinal to the Society of Independent Artists in 1917, and that very toilet is distributed from museum to museum with a nod and a smirk. This is art? This is *art*. Why is *Fountain* considered art, but not the toilet we use daily in our apartment? Why is a blank canvas sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars when there are hundreds of wonderful artists struggling to pay the electric bill? If anything can be art, then why can't anyone be an artist?

Young Hae-Chang Heavy Industries has a more nuanced view of the world of art in "The Art of Sleep" than their narrator displays. The thesis of the narrator's argument has a key flaw, one that the narrator eventually recognizes themselves: "If everything is art, we're going to go nuts." There must be a distinction between art and common things. Why else would our culture value a *toilet* of all things as an artwork, but only that one? It is because the urinal used in *Fountain* was signed by Marcel Duchamp and brought up the conversation about what art is. Art is everywhere, but it must have context, history, purpose, and meaning behind it. Someone must make the object an artwork, be it an artist or the audience.

In a way, "The Art of Sleep" is a criticism of both the hyper-exclusive art world of the wealthy elite and of the idea that art has no meaning. Yes, it is appalling that works of famous artists are bought and sold between the rich instead of being placed in museums for the world to enjoy. And yes, an artist can turn anything into a work of art, even a blank canvas or a urinal. But we value art—and by extension, literature—because of what we meaning we give it.

This flexibility of meaning is effectively the message of "The Art of Silence," a companion piece and transcription of an interview between Chang, Voge, and Jemina Rellie, who worked at Tate Modern at the time. Represented by text-to-speech substitutes, Rellie spends much of the interview trying to get either Chang or Voge to explain "The Art of Sleep" or, at the very least, get some insight into their artistic process. To her exasperation, the duo bickers, talks over each other, and debates about if Chang has a Ph.D. instead of reminiscing about their most recent project. In fact, Voge mistakes the title of the work as "Art of Silence" and not "Sleep" (hence the similar title).

He quips, “I was going to play it cool. Not say a thing. Get it? … So you’d ask me a question and… nothing. I wouldn’t say anything.” The pair then explains how Rellie herself inspired the piece and how little they know about the art world. Chang clarifies, “Our ignorance is bliss foisted on others. … We create from ignorance.” Once Chang and Voge cease arguing, the duo asks Rellie to sing, and she obliges with a rendition of “Funky Nassau” by The Beginning of the End, an old R&B tune that has been playing in the background throughout the film.

The idea that meaning is on the reader/viewer’s part once again arises. Voge’s jests about “The Art of Silence” and how he prepared for the whole interview around silence is an excellent example, but the duo elaborates on this later:

RELLIE: What’s great about online work?
VOGE: The control. It’s like easel painting.
CHANG: What are you talking about? We have no control.
VOGE: Yes, we do. We do a piece. We upload it. No one tells us how or where to hang it. No muss, no fuss.
CHANG: Oh, I thought you meant control of the meaning.
VOGE: Are you crazy? We have no idea what we’re doing.
CHANG: That’s not what I meant.
VOGE: What I mean is that we may think we know what we’re doing, but in the end it’s not up to us.
CHANG: Thank God.
VOGE: We just do our job.
RELLIE: Which is?
CHANG & VOGE: What?
RELLIE: What is your job?
CHANG: We make the work, upload it, and have a ready-made audience waiting to, uh, slam it. (“The Art of Silence”)

Like the narrator of "The Art of Sleep," Heavy Industries refuse to dress in formal attire or language. Art for them is their profession, but they know all too well how little respect an artist gets from the public compared to rocket scientists and brain surgeons. Yet, they also realize that the Internet gives them a free platform to experiment with words, music, and visual melody. Their admirers and detractors send hate and praise to their email, the works they produce are showcased around the world, and all their works are hosted on a website that has no images, frills, or fancy fonts. The only way to have total control over the meaning of their works would be to never create them in the first place.

When I taught my 4000-level Honors course, I proposed an experiment. Each student would choose one of Heavy Industries' library of works, watch it, and tell the class about it. With so many to choose from, I informed the students that the works were "first-come, first-served;" this would ensure that there would be little overlap between everyone. This allowed each student to bring interesting discussions to the forums. I included this assignment after our general discussion of "The Art of Sleep" and a couple other works from Heavy Industries.

If postmodernism, criticism of the art world, and "Funky Nassau" do not fit the course's themes, I have other recommendations. "Ah" puts the reader into a line at a US airport in a tale of how xenophobia and racism affect people just passing through. "What is an Intellectual?" is an excerpt of a talk Chang and Voge gave at Yale, explaining how democracy allows people to speak their minds and how those who complain are often those with legitimate points to make.

The most common complaint I received from my students was that the works moved much faster than they had expected. This is due in part to my use of the

"Insomniac Version" of "The Art of Sleep," a significantly hastened version of the original. While I think that this version better illustrates the narrator's sleeplessness, it may not be the best for those who take their time when reading. Instructing students on how to pause Flash animations will also come in handy, especially if an assignment requires quotes since the only way to back-track is to start the film from the beginning. Despite all this, my students quickly adapted and took well to the work of Young Hae-Chang Heavy Industries.

***Depression Quest* – Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey, and Isaac Schankler**

The digital climate shifts faster than many people realize. Individuals become celebrities after posting a single video, entire careers can be destroyed or begun with a single post to Twitter, and the lives of innocent people are balanced on an invisible string of code that can be cut the moment the wrong person hits "Enter."

Zoe Quinn, one of the developers behind *Depression Quest*, knows this all too well. As *Depression Quest* began to gain some merits from gaming organizations, news outlets, and blogs, a jilted ex-boyfriend uploaded a rambling, incoherent accusation, falsely claiming that Quinn slept with a journalist at the gaming blog Kotaku in exchange for a good review for the game. The journalist named never reviewed *Depression Quest*. Nevertheless, this was the start of the 2014 Gamergate controversy, which resulted in death threats, harassment, and doxxing of Quinn and other prominent female developers and games critics. Simon Parkin, writing for *The New Yorker*, found this post from one of the thousands targeted at Quinn, "Next time she shows up at a conference we … give her a crippling injury that's never going to fully heal … a good solid injury to the knees. I'd say a brain damage, but we don't want to make it so she ends up too retarded to fear us"

(para. 1). The entire Gamergate scandal was a hurtful mess born from deep-rooted misogyny, but it gained popularity by framing its argument as a criticism of games journalism while downplaying the Alt-Right propaganda that started the movement. Incidents like this have convinced some to believe that video games should remain a form of entertainment and that game developers should keep quiet about social issues like race, mental health, and sexuality. Somehow, art should be a neutral space where no one is confronted about their beliefs, the status quo is maintained, and any pain that exists in the world outside stays outside. As I will demonstrate with the next few works and with *Depression Quest*, this should not, has not, and will not be the case.

Depression Quest states very clearly that, even though it is a game, its subject matter should be taken seriously. The developers state:

> The goal of this game is twofold: firstly, we want to illustrate as clearly as possible what depression is like, so that it may be better understood by people without depression. Hopefully this can be something to spread awareness and fight against the social stigma and misunderstandings that depression sufferers face. Secondly, our hope is that in presenting as real a simulation of depression as possible, other sufferers will come to know that they aren't alone, and hopefully derive some measure of comfort from that. (*Depression Quest*)

This introduction also includes links to The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Quinn et al. make the reader acutely aware that this is not "just a game" nor will it be a "fun" experience, but they emphasize how important such a discussion can be.

The game begins with a short description of "your" life thus far. The player is "a mid-twenties human being" in a relationship with a slightly younger woman named Alex, a decent-paying job, and a small group of friends. Both Mom and Dad are around and still married. For many, this is not the picture of

"severely depressed" they had been trained to see. The player seems to live a normal, if somewhat bland, life. Quinn, who also suffers from depression, explains, "I deliberately created a protagonist who has a lot of support networks and resources that I don't have. We wanted to preempt the argument that someone is only depressed because they have a difficult life. Anyone can have depression. The illness doesn't care how much you do or don't have" (Parkin, para. 12).

The first scenario of *Depression Quest* has the player come home from the office. The protagonist is stressed and lacks the motivation to work on their passion project. The options presented are

1. ~~Order some food, grab a drink, and hunker down for a night of work.~~
2. Reluctantly sit down at your desk and try and make yourself do something.
3. Turn on the TV, telling yourself you just need a quick half hour to unwind from work.
4. Crawl into bed. You're so stressed and overwhelmed you couldn't possibly accomplish anything anyways. (*Depression Quest*)

There are some key similarities between *Depression Quest* and the many personality-quiz games that have cropped up in recent years. Here is a problem and a list of solutions, so which one works best? However, the first option is unusable. This is how depression is represented in the game; if the player falls further into depression, the number of choices that can be made diminishes. This reflects how people with depression suffer from decreased energy. As Helen Lewis's review states, "The game attempts to mimic the exhaustion and listlessness which so often accompany depression—as well as that strange sensation of being somewhere outside yourself, knowing that you are making the wrong choices but lacking the strength to find a new path" (341). The player *can't*

just do what they love; they are too busy spinning their wheels, unsure where to go.

The player also gets into discussions and arguments with their well-meaning, but judgmental mother. If they try to speak their feelings, she will respond, “An attitude like that won’t get you anywhere. You need to work harder at getting what you want instead of sitting around feeling sad about it. Nothing good will happen unless you make it happen” (*Depression Quest*). The protagonist rationalizes that “she’s giving you the advice that makes sense to her… however, she doesn’t understand that it’s not as simple as somehow deciding to be positive or work harder – it’s that *those things aren’t viable options because of these feelings*” (my emphasis). From here, more choices begin to be blocked off, emphasizing that depression is a feedback loop. The less one connects, the worse they feel, the less they connect, and so on.

The choices the player makes inevitably affect the game’s ending. In one, the protagonist goes to therapy, takes medication, and moves in with Alex. In another, the protagonist isolates themselves as depression leads them down a path of least resistance. But, as the developers stress in the game’s epilogue, neither depression nor *Depression Quest* has an ending: “There is no neat resolution to depression… Instead of a tidy ending, we want to just provide a series of outlooks to take moving forward. After all, that’s all we can really do with depression – just keep moving forward.”

Depression Quest is as insight into how depression can afflict those cursed with it. College is a stressful environment, and the 2016 annual report by the

Center for Collegiate Mental Health found that out of 150,483 students, half had attended counseling out of concern for their mental health but most students only attended a single session per year (4, 7). By working through *Depression Quest*, students can learn to recognize the symptoms within themselves as well as methods to treat the illness. This is by no means a replacement for a real diagnosis, but raising peoples' emotional intelligence can rarely go wrong.

There are also the issues of Gamergate, online harassment, and the rise of the Alt-Right movement. One of the most vocal supporters of the Gamergate movement, conservative pundit Milo Yiannopoulos, worked closely with Steve Bannon on Breitbart, exposing their racist, sexist, and violent views to an audience that quickly accepted them. In many ways, Gamergate was a dress rehearsal for the 2016 US Presidential Election. Writing for *The Guardian*, Matt Lees notes that Breitbart and other hyper-conservative voices honed the volatility of Gamergate's supporters:

> [T]his was now a wider war between "Social Justice Warriors" (SJWs) and everyday, normal, decent people. Games were simply the tip of the iceberg – progressive values, went the argument, were destroying everything. … They saw the culture they considered theirs being ripped away from them. In their zero sum mindset, they read growing artistic equality as a threat. (para. 11)

America's staunch partisanship of recent years was on full display during the Gamergate controversy. Conservatives proclaimed that games media were being hijacked by liberals who sought to shove "diversity" and "equality" down their throats. Liberals came to the defense of the women who were under attack, but they also wrapped themselves up in discussions over free speech. "Alt-Right" wasn't really a term back then nor was it applied to the viler perpetrators. But

when Donald Trump began attacking identity politics to bolster his own platform, "many of the accounts that had been obsessed with Quinn and ethics in video-game journalism changed their avatars to Pepe the Frog, tweeted about #MAGA, and explored white nationalism" (Malone, para. 41). Gamergate never ended; it just changed names.

It is unfortunate that *Depression Quest* may forever be known as "the game that started Gamergate" as a result of this controversy. Zoe Quinn, despite making other works and publishing a memoir, will always be branded as the first major target of the modern Alt-Right. Yet, both she and her work need to be examined because of this. Depression exists, pain exists, hatred exists, and yet we can still find a reason to smile at the end of the day. Just as the player can work their way to a brighter tomorrow, we, too, can work together to make this world a better place.

***The Beginner's Guide* – Davey Wreden**

The Beginner's Guide is representative of the narrative exploration genre of video games. Derogatorily called "walking simulators," these games often have few mechanics and focus on giving the player a story to piece together. *Gone Home* by developer Fullbright is one such example, leading the player through the home of a family that has grown apart while telling the stories of the inhabitants through audio logs, notes, and the environment. Wreden's previous game, *The Stanley Parable*, used this style of game to satirize the lack of agency the players believe they have by having a blustery British narrator criticize and rebuke the player for not playing along with "his" story.

Wreden's follow-up, however, is a quiet, contemplative, and melancholic tale. Wreden introduces himself, provide his email address, and escorts players through the works of "Coda," a friend of his who developed a number of small games before stopping for unknown reasons. As the tour progresses, Wreden explains how the different mechanics work within each game, speculates on what they mean, and, most importantly, how they fit into his theory of Coda. He states, "There's a bigger picture that all of his games are meant to play a role in, some larger meaning that we won't be able to grasp until we've seen all of them, and once we have we can step back and start to understand what exactly that bigger picture is." As the game progresses, Wreden becomes more and more worried about Coda, believing that his friend is becoming mentally trapped and is symbolizing that through his games.

The truth is that the one "trapped" is Wreden. The final game, dubbed "The Tower," hides a message behind three unfair games. The first is an invisible maze that rearranges itself each time the player hits a wall. The second requires a six-digit code that must be guessed randomly. The third is a door that won't open until the switch on the opposite side is pulled. Wreden, as he has done in similar situations, modifies the game so that the player can advance. Behind the final door lies a series of messages from Coda himself, asking Davey to "stop taking my games and showing them to people against my wishes" and "stop changing my games." Coda, who Wreden sees as someone who was falling into depression and needed someone to help him, explains to him that "Struggling to come up with new ideas is not making me depressed, low points are just a part of the process. … *The fact that you think I am frustrated or broken says more about you than*

about me" (my emphasis). After encountering this, Wreden pleads with Coda to make games again:

> If I apologize to you truly and deeply, will you start making games again? … Can I apologize? What if I tell you I was wrong, will that work? Will that fix it? … I want to know how to be a good person, I want to know how to not hate myself. Please! I'm fading. And all I want is to know that I'm going to be okay.

This admission of guilt puts the motives of Wreden and his explanations of Coda's work into a new perspective. The recurring lampposts that Wreden claims is Coda's way of connecting all his works, for example, aren't part of the games. Wreden tells the player that Coda started placing these lampposts into his games so that he can have "a reference point, he wants the work to be leading to something. He wants a destination!" But Coda reveals that it is Davey who needs the reference point, who dismissed Coda's earlier games because they, by Wreden's own admission, were "strange and abstract games with no clear purpose." They were too vague to chat about in casual conversation and too short to really provide the deep, philosophical conversations that Wreden desired. And so, Wreden manipulated the game to further his own narrative, locking himself into the idea that an author's mind can be understood based solely on the work that he/she creates.

Or, rather, the *character* of Davey Wreden in *The Beginner's Guide* did this. While the game is introduced to us as a work of non-fiction as evidenced by having the developer himself provide his own email address and talk directly to the player, the story that "Davey" tells us—that he modified Coda's games, showed them off to people (possibly stealing the credit for the games), and then proceeded to sell those games as *The Beginner's Guide*—cannot be true. To begin, Davey Wreden did not create *The Beginner's Guide* on his own; many names are listed in the credits. In addition, Wreden

is selling the game for roughly $10, which, as Darren Nakamura from *Destructoid* explains, breaks the illusion, "[Wreden] took a collection of somebody else's games, which include a game about not sharing his games, and is selling it for profit. That's just unthinkable" (para. 11). To charge money for a work someone else made is illegal, so the fact that no one has filed suit, posted about the game, or claimed to be Coda, and that the game continues to be sold proves that the work is fictional. Therefore, neither Coda nor "Davey" exist outside of *The Beginner's Guide*.

Now a new question arises: what is *The Beginner's Guide* for? "Davey" claims that it is an introduction to the works of Coda, then into the mind of Coda himself. Since the work is purely fictional, why make this "non-fiction"? Why does the ruse exist?

Focusing on the real Davey Wreden, there is speculation that *The Beginner's Guide* is a self-diagnosis of sorts. Writing on the now-defunct developer website for *The Stanley Parable*, Wreden made a blog post detailing his depression following the game's release and subsequent success. One of the contributing factors was the overwhelming praise his work received. Wreden explains, "If you were insecure about other peoples' opinions of you and *addicted to praise* in order to feel good about yourself, the dirty truth is that there is no amount of praise you can receive that will make that insecurity go away. What fire dies when you feed it?" ("Game of the Year," para. 8, emphasis mine). In the epilogue of *The Beginner's Guide,* "Davey" opines, "If I knew that my life depended on finding something to be driven by other than validation… what would that even be? It's strange, *but the thought of not being driven by external validation is unthinkable*…" (emphasis mine). The parallel shown here points to *The Beginner's Guide* as a self-assessment, of Wreden criticizing his past self for being so reliant on praise as a

motivator while neglecting his “Coda,” the inner artist who “just likes making prisons” (*The Beginner’s Guide*).

However, the work is more apt as a “beginner’s guide” to the “Death of the Author” by Roland Barthes. Barthes declared that “the author is never more than the instance writing” and that “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (add citation). While the author does create the text, s/he is not responsible for how people *read* the text. There are just too many vagaries in language, thousands of conflicting and contrasting cultural backgrounds, and hundreds of millions of readers to declare that the author’s interpretation of their own work is the only one. Barthes continues, “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (add citation). This is what “Davey” attempts to do for the player by rushing through the early works of Coda, modifying the later works, and providing misleading information; “Davey” wants his idea of Coda to be the definitive Coda, to “close the writing.” When he is ultimately unable to do so, he abandons the game entirely, leaving the players alone to come up with their own thoughts about the work.

By including Wreden in the discussion of *The Beginner’s Guide*, as “Davey” attempts to do by showing Wreden’s email address and asking for comments and interpretations, the story itself is limited to what the player/reader knows about Wreden. If a student approaches *The Beginner’s Guide* and has never heard of Wreden’s other works (or even Wreden himself, which is very likely), what significance does the “Game of the Year” post hold? None. It is irrelevant. The work is fictional, so the parallels

between the two Daveys only exist to further confuse the reader who, like "Davey," is trying to read into the mind of the author through their works. To read *The Beginner's Guide*, one must accept that there is no path that leads to the author within; there is only the work itself.

As mentioned, *The Beginner's Guide* is an excellent introduction to "The Death of the Author" and into reader-response theory. While many works of literature lend themselves to certain viewpoints, few are as fit for explaining specific literary criticisms, especially one as dense as reader-response theory. I would recommend allowing students the chance to work through the game first, then have them post what they think the game is about, who Coda is, what *The Beginner's Guide* is for, etc. Let them fall into "Davey's" mistakes so that when the edifice is stripped away by Barthes, they will be awed at the machinations within the story that led them to their potentially flawed conclusions.

Since *The Beginner's Guide* only takes about an hour and a half to complete, there might be some merit in bundling the work with *The Stanley Parable*. However, I think that the two works are too far apart thematically and tonally to adequately fit together. Where *The Beginner's Guide* is direct, linear, and succinct, *The Stanley Parable* sprawls into new territories, travels into completely different games, and laughs at its own confusing design. Their core connection—that narratives and video games are intentional in their execution and design—can be enough of a thread to tie them together. But, I would devote one week to *The Beginner's Guide* and another to *The Stanley Parable,* rather than teach them simultaneously, to explore their concepts and themes in depth.

***Spec Ops: The Line* –Yager Development**

Adaptations, as many book lovers can attest, are rarely renditions of their source material. Changes are often made to appeal to wider audiences, clarify notable issues with the original work, and condense a long, sprawling narrative into roughly 90 minutes. There are also adaptations that prefer instead to translate the work as best as possible to the screen, even if including every detail makes the film run over eight hours. With the astounding popularity of video games, there have been attempts at adapting classic novels and films into this new medium. Unfortunately, many of those attempts come in the form of tie-in games for popular movies, especially those aimed at younger demographics. These games either have little-to-nothing to do with the originals, are stuffed with poorly-rendered full-motion video clips of the movies in between whatever game was presented, or were reskinned versions of popular titles featuring the movie characters. Because of this oversaturation, the demand for video game adaptations has faded.

Amid all this, a seemingly generic game called *Spec Ops: The Line* was released in 2012. To an unknowing consumer, this was another in the long list of "militainment" (military-entertainment) games scrambling to attract the massive audiences and profits that the *Call of Duty* and *Gears of War* franchises had garnered. Critics, however, could quickly spot that *Spec Ops* was a new take on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and borrowed elements from Francis Ford Coppola's film version, *Apocalypse Now*. While not a direct adaption, *Spec Ops* brings Conrad's anti-colonial message and applies it to a post-colonial, post-9/11 world.

Spec Ops begins like most militainment shooters of the era by indulging the player's power fantasy in a helicopter sky battle akin to the *Rambo* films. The game then

flashes back to the start of the story, explaining how Captain Walker and his special forces have been sent to a sandstorm-struck Dubai to find Colonel John Konrad and the 33rd Regiment. This regiment, Walker laments, disregarded orders to evacuate the area to instead aid the stranded citizens of the city. When Delta Squad is sent as a response to a distress signal, they come under fire from local rebels. Walker and his crew then carve a path through them, only to have the 33rd attack them as well.

The motif of anti-colonialism that *Spec Ops* carries forth from Conrad and Coppola is exemplified in how quickly Walker justifies his actions on foreign soil. After communications with the outside world are gone, he and his team are unaccountable agents with superior firepower, combat training, and (in typical video game fashion) regenerating health bars. Their mission is to locate Col. Konrad, but once rebel soldiers appear, the player is given multiple prompts to fire the first shot. From there, the objective moves to eliminating the Dubai natives. At one pivotal point, however, the player (as Walker) rounds a corner right into soldiers from the 33rd. Instead of a cutscene or a dialogue, gunfire is exchanged, and Walker once again justifies his actions, claiming it was self-defense.

As the player continues, the atrocities they commit continue, and it culminates in the player using white phosphorous. Brendan Keogh's article on *Spec Ops* details the effects of the chemical weapon, stating that "white phosphorous unleashes thick smog of incandescent particles that stick to and burn through flesh. Used extensively throughout the Korean and Vietnam campaigns by the US Army, it has often been deployed on civilian areas to terrible effect, and is still used in various conflicts today" (9). The game forces players to use this weapon to progress the game, with the only other option being

to turn it off. Johannes Fehrle's criticism on the game elaborates: "The key to the moral dilemma the game raises is interactivity, but it is not interactivity in the sense of the players making or even having real *narrative* choices, but rather interactivity in the sense of the *player advancing the game* through her actions" (240, my emphasis). Unlike the reader of novels like *American Psycho* or *120 Days of Sodom* or the film-goer watching *Saw* and *Antichrist*, the player of *Spec Ops* cannot take comfort that *they* would never do something like that. They are not spectators, but participants.

Yager Development, aware of this, included loading screen hints such as "To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless" and "The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?" Walker's animations change as well, moving from "mercy killing" to brutal and inhumane treatment of wounded soldiers, noted by the increased aggression from his voice and disheveled, bloody appearance later in the game. To play *Spec Ops* is to journey down the river, into the heart of darkness itself. And when Walker and the player finally meet Konrad, they find a man finishing a painting of an earlier scene from the game, a woman and child burned and dying from the white phosphorous unleashed upon them. Walker accuses Konrad, but the colonel responds, "Your orders killed 47 innocent people. Someone has to pay for your crimes, Walker. Who's it gonna be?" The irony is that Konrad long since died, as Walker's mind and body have been collapsing under the weight of his guilt. Walker's "Konrad" reveals just how much control Walker (and the player) had:

> "None of this would have happened *if you'd just stopped*. But on you marched. And for what? … *You're no savior*. Your talents lie elsewhere. … It takes a strong man to deny what's right in front of him. And if the truth is undeniable, you create your own. … The truth, Walker, is that

> you're here because *you wanted to feel like something you're not*. *A hero*" (emphasis mine).

The player then enters a showdown with "Konrad" and either lets the apparition kill Walker (which represents Walker's decision to copy Konrad's own suicide) or fires first, choosing to let Walker face the consequences of his actions.

The epilogue finds Walker surrounded by American troops, who want to help take him home. If Walker drops his weapon, he is escorted back. If the player attacks and dies, Walker spends his last moments recalling a conversation with Konrad, in which the latter says, "Home? We can't go home. There's *a line* men like us have to cross. And if we're lucky, we do what's necessary then we die. No, all I really want, Captain, is peace." If the player is victorious, Walker takes a radio from one of the troops, stating curtly, "Gentlemen, welcome to Dubai." There are no happy endings; *Spec Ops* merely indulges the player's bloodthirst to show just how terrifying it is that we find games like these entertaining.

Unlike *The Beginner's Guide*, *Spec Ops: The Line* has "fail-states," situations where the player must play over and over until they succeed. To progress, the player must hone their skills, and this can be difficult for those who have not played similar games. Thankfully, the game does have variable difficulty, allowing less experienced players to still move forward without losing too often. Educators should still give students plenty of time to play the game. I suggest assigning it over the weekend and early in the semester, potentially before midterms.

Spec Ops's graphic cruelty, on the other hand, may physically sicken some students. The images are quite grotesque, and the acts they will have to commit in the name of "finishing the story" are atrocious. People often encounter strenuous moments in

novels and film, but committing war crimes probably isn't as digestible as reading about them. Should students feel uncomfortable about playing the game, I highly recommend letting them watch an online playthrough. There are many to choose from, and some videos provide player commentary and reactions, enhancing the experience. This also helps the wallets of the students since the game retails for $30, though it frequently goes on sale for less than $10.

I also would recommend teaching *Spec Ops* in conjunction with *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* to illustrate how adaptations carry on a work's core message while updating it for a new audience. *Heart of Darkness* speaks in opposition to the Belgian Congo and the dissection of Africa by Europeans. *Apocalypse Now* similarly attacks the cruelty of American soldiers in the Vietnam War. With *Spec Ops,* students will find these events correlated to the Iraq War and the "War on Terror." By doing so, students will learn how each work argues against colonialism, excessive violence, and other topics and how those issues have changed (or, in some cases, stayed the same) over the centuries.

***How to Rob a Bank* by Alan Bigelow**

Electronic literature occasionally suffers from being "bland." We are used to books having a simpler appearance, with their only visual distinctions being their cover art and material components. Those seeking to write with technology must compete with video games, which utilize the latest and greatest computer hardware to their maximum potential, and film, an even more popular and more accessible multimedia experience. Anything more simplistic will appear trivial, uninspired, or downright lazy by comparison. However, as Serge Bouchardon emphasizes in his article "Towards a

Tension-Based Definition of Digital Literature," "Digital literature is based on tensions that contribute to establishing its specificity: tension on the *media*, on the *semiotic forms*, on the *programmed writing*, and on the *aesthetic experience*. These tensions highlight the role of the digital medium, of the multimedia dimension, of the program and of gestures and interactivity" (11, emphasis mine). The reader of an electronic text observes more than just the words on the screen, choosing to take note of how the story plays out in the chosen medium.

How to Rob a Bank by Alan Bigelow exemplifies how such a work operates. Taking place in five parts, this work tells how Ted, a 20-year-old college dropout, robs a bank to impress his girlfriend Elizabeth and solve his financial woes. Instead of paragraphs describing the bank and the robbery like a novel or using a robbery game, *How to Rob a Bank* bounces between the smartphone screens of Ted and Elizabeth. While the work could be dismissed as a glorified PowerPoint, that would ignore how well the story of this modern Bonnie-and-Clyde story is illustrated through a humble pair of iPhone screens.

In part one, "research," Ted begins his training to rob a bank via Google. He reads some articles, orders a gun-like water pistol on eBay, downloads a free police scanner from the Apple App Store, robs a bank while bragging about the experience on Instagram, and quickly googles "what to do when ribberies go wrong" when his hastily constructed plan falls apart. Despite the panic shown in his misspelling, Ted does escape with some cash and attempts to flee to Mexico.

Part two, "escape," introduces Elizabeth as she swoons at Ted's "successful" bank robbery, and the two attempt to get together while he is on the run from the police. This is

continued in part three, “romance,” where Ted and Elizabeth officially begin their Bonnie and Clyde-style robberies as a couple. Their antics bring the attention of the media and Elizabeth’s sister Deborah, who tells both the FBI and news outlets about her sister’s crimes.

Part four, “home,” finds the “Smiths” in hiding from the FBI in a home with their newborn daughter Alexandria. Without any banks to rob in their new neighborhood, Ted grows bored, watching television and surfing the web to make up for the lack of death-defying thrills. Elizabeth, on the other hand, deals with the burden of motherhood, cataloging the experience in a journal intended for Alexandria to read later, and of her failing marriage. Eventually, Elizabeth writes, “Dearest Child—What we do best is rob banks. Nothing else makes sense. Remember, and forgive us” (“home”).

“sister, sister,” the final act, takes place over a series of articles by Deborah, who seems to be using her column to both inform the world of her sister’s misdeeds and advertise her own worthiness and regrets. In her first article, she writes:

> My name is Deborah Franken, and the *Huffington Post* asked me to write a series of posts about the “Ted & Lizzie” crimes.
>
> They asked me because Elizabeth Franken is my sister, so I know all about her career as a disgraced woman and notorious bank robber.
>
> I’m also an excellent communicator (it’s not easy to get a B.A. in English at Buffalo State!), not to mention my career as a registered nurse… Did I mention my local reputation as a stellar cook and captivating millennial beauty? This is something I am sure *The Huffington Post* would be interested in, but when I suggested it as an alternative to a low-class string of robberies with absolutely zero public edification, they politely said no, just the sister, please. And could you use links and multimedia? (“sister, sister”)

While Deborah constantly derides her sister’s actions, we do get some additional details of Ted and Elizabeth, who have started taking their infant child with them

on their bank jobs. Interspersed between the articles are tweets from such trusted sources as "TheTruthNut" who rally for the criminal trio in addition to constant pop-ups begging readers to register for the *Huffington Post* newsletter. These articles are a stark detour from the previous back-and-forth between Ted and Elizabeth's phones, but they emphasize the work's core themes: screen addiction, hyperconnectivity, and alienation.

Ted, Elizabeth, and Deborah are all glued to their phones and the Internet, unable to break away from the mesmerizing blue-white glow. All three gleefully post pictures of themselves, write about their day, and connect with a massive virtual world that promises to deliver on all their desires. Screen addiction is quickly becoming a topic of discussion online, ironically, and parents are worried that their children are spending too much time on digital devices. Yet, the three main characters of *How to Rob a Bank* are all adults, with Deborah as oldest, nearing the age of 40. Ted and Elizabeth are constantly on their phones, choosing to pass the time with mobile games, text one another, ask Google if their relationship is secure, and journal their crimes on social media. Even when they stop robbing banks, they can't escape. Ted becomes obsessed with a game where all he does is push a button. Elizabeth needs to constantly look up how to be a mother and care for her child. Deborah's column reveals her emotional wreck of a life and her bitter jealousy of her sister's celebrity. Their phones are an extension of themselves, their personalities and lives made digital.

And the Internet fuels their addictions. Ted can download a handful of apps and be ready to rob a bank in minutes. Elizabeth hones her mind through

meditation, orders food, and receives the adoration of fans on Twitter every time she boasts about ditching the cops. Deborah becomes increasingly paranoid about how advertisers seem to know her every wish while she is unable to stop gloating about her superiority over her sister. Everything on the Internet is connected. Part five even mimics an attack from a Chinese hacker, as if the world itself is trying to connect itself to Deborah's phone.

The important theme of *How to Rob a Bank*, however, is alienation. Ted's primary goal for robbing the bank in the first place was to win Elizabeth's affection and to have enough money to keep her interested. He's an orphan with no family or friends, and his stint in college didn't help him in any regard. Elizabeth doesn't fare much better, as Deborah writes that the two of them lost their parents in a hit-and-run incident. Ted and Elizabeth make up for their lack of family with their social media fans, who actively support their Bonnie-and-Clyde-like crime spree. The relatively quiet "home" reflects just how quickly Ted and Elizabeth feel the pain of disconnecting from that rush of online glory; they can't even stand to be in the same room as one another without referring to their phones. Even as Deborah claims that she had many gentlemen suitors clamoring for her attention, the fact that she keeps bringing it up points to how much she wants to be as adored as her sister. The final screen has Deborah confused and panicking, "Men have sent me photos of their genitalia! With offers of marriage. Has the world gone crazy? Have we lost our minds?" ("sister, sister"). There is no answer given here.

How to Rob a Bank is an excellent work to showcase how someone with an idea and a limited budget can still create a fantastic and meaningful work of electronic literature. With its simple narrative style and recognizable visuals (i.e. Instagram, *The Huffington Post*, Twitter, etc.), most college students will recognize and relate to the characters, perhaps seeing some of their Internet habits displayed by Ted, Elizabeth, and Deborah. This will make the work easy to teach, and its accessibility on mobile devices and zero cost will give students something they can share with friends and family.

I also see this work as an excellent example for creative writing classes that wish to experiment with digital media. Perhaps as a final assignment, students can read *How to Rob a Bank* and be encouraged to create a story using a similar style. There are a growing number of works that use a technological interface to tell a story. *Emily is Away* uses the now-defunct AOL Instant Messenger as an exploration of its titular character, and *Simulacra* finds the reader-as-player rifling through a stranger's phone to find (and save) its owner. With the right tools, some direction, and practice, a creative writing course focused on digital works could be born.

Honorable Mentions

I've taught another hypertext work, Shelly Jackson's *My Body & a Wunderkammer*, to great success. While I do think *afternoon* is culturally and historically significant, Jackson's *My Body* is an excellent journey into the author's mind and body. Opening with the sound of breathing and a sketch of Jackson's body, readers explore her thoughts, stories, and emotions contained in

each drawer of her “Wunderkammer” (cabinet of wonders). Her hips evoke memories of pottery and shaved legs, she is covered in tattoos and will “teach my lovers to read them,” and once she screamed into the night in an unsuccessful attempt to purge a headache (“tattoos”). Few people are comfortable with their own bodies, and fewer still are at ease enough to discuss how they developed their sexuality, the misguided experiments they performed on themselves in their youth. Yet, Jackson does not shy away from these gross, human details.

Speaking of gross, human details, *Façade* by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern places players into the home of Grace and Trip, a married couple who are trying to hide their dysfunctional relationship while entertaining their guest. Unlike the other games in this chapter, *Façade* utilizes artificial intelligence to allow players to type in responses and to randomize elements of the story. Depending on how the player handles the warring partners, the player can be kicked out of the apartment, accidentally reveal hidden affairs and uncover unwanted truths, and might remind the two of why they married in the first place. It is a deceptively simple, but effective one-act interactive play.

Another “simple, but effective” title is *The Brain Drawing the Bullet* by Alan Trotter. Here, the reader sifts through a series of letters by an editor working on a report on the murder of Joan Vollmer, whom the poet William S. Burroughs shot during a drunken escapade. As each interviewee recounts the story, the editor changes the text of the previous testimonies, either to coincide with new evidence, to make the story more interesting, or some other reason. Since so much of the text can change at once, it becomes hard to figure out which parts of the story

have stayed constant and which have changed dramatically. *The Brain Drawing the Bullet* mirrors the editor's own obsession with the story through this mechanic, as the edits become more expansive, rapid, and never-ending. There are many more works I could include here, but I believe that this small list will offer some idea as to what to look for in electronic literature.

CHAPTER 4

Electronic Literature in the Classroom

> *Every age seeks out the appropriate medium in which to confront the unanswerable questions of human existence. We cannot limit ourselves to Elizabethan or Victorian forms any more than Shakespeare could have written within the conventions of the Aristotelian tragedy or the medieval passion play.* (*Murray,* *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, *280)*

Introduction

In my experience, rushing headlong into the near-infinite void of cyberspace with a group of thirty-something fresh students is a terrible idea. Without the right mindset, vocabulary, and skills, educators risk destroying any interest a student might have in digital texts or, worse, literature in general. This could be due to any number of reasons; overzealousness to show how profound a specific work is, obfuscating the lessons with extremely technical language used out of habit, or selecting works with too much depth for novice readers are all mistakes that I have personally made, and I hope this chapter will help all future teachers avoid such pains.

My First Attempt

In the Spring of 2017, Dr. Claudia Grinnell and I co-authored a course on Electronic Literature studies and used it for the Honors Seminar with Program Director Dr. Joshua Stockley's approval. This program had been my Honors Project for my Bachelor's Degree, and I was ecstatic about giving it a true field test. The class was conducted online through Moodle. Dr. Grinnell gave me near-total control over the

course and only stepped in if necessary, allowing me to test various teaching approaches and tactics.

My first concern with the course was that most of the students were not English majors. They were wonderful students, but I constantly feared that I would accidentally throw out excessively complex theories that they had no training in. They came from a wide pool of backgrounds and fields of study, so I did my best to encourage the students to utilize what they had learned and apply it to the course. I did decide to choose a traditional text to provide a foundation for the course. Dr. Grinnell and I wanted to select a novel that students could read easily, obtain cheaply, and would connect to the overall themes of the later, electronic works. We settled on William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, a pre-Internet text that helped define early and modern Internet culture through its technological dystopia and its then-fictional "cyberspace."

To emphasize creative discussion, I requested a response paper for most of the works. Regarding *Neuromancer*, I asked for a short 750-word essay. In hindsight, I should have made these responses available for all student to read as forum posts, but I wanted to read what each student personally thought about the work, out of the eyes of their classmates. I also made the word limit too short, as I did not want to stress the students out. Most students responded positively to the unit, although an in-class discussion would have alleviated some of the more confusing segments of *Neuromancer*. Gibson's futuristic world of mega-corporations, human cyborgs, and console cowboys were a thrill to read, but without the direct conversations that a classroom setting provides, this section was disconnected from the rest of the course.

This lack of clarification also affected the second assignment, a review of a "cyberpunk" film. Since *Neuromancer* currently has no film adaptation, I still wanted to bridge the gap between "traditional literature" and "electronic literature" by using something in-between the two: an audio-visual narrative format, also known as cinema. The students would choose their film and then compare *Neuromancer* and their film choice in a forum post and a couple of responses to other posts. The catch was that students would have to cite at least one scholarly, peer-reviewed article in their main post. This was to have the students practice MLA formatting and for them to become accustomed to analyzing audio-visual media. Essentially, this was a practice run for the later works. As expected, the MLA formatting did need some correcting, but the students were able to point out the similar themes in films like *Ex Machina*, *Blade Runner*, and *The Matrix*.

The following week, students read two of four possible articles or excerpts on electronic literature. The options were the introductory chapter from Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, the first chapter of Epsen Aarseth's *Cybertext*, N. Katherine Hayles' article "Electronic Literature: What is it?" and Dene Grigar's follow-up piece "Electronic Literature: Where is it?" The latter two were some of the first articles that I had ever read on the subject, and they elegantly answer their title questions. Murray's journey through fictional literary apocalypses as told by *Fahrenheit 451, Brave New World,* and other novels showed students how afraid and wrong authors and critics were about new, accessible media and the "death of literature." Aarseth's chapter, on the other hand, worked for students who needed something technical to grasp on to.

The first work of electronic literature we read was *My Body & a Wunderkammer* by Shelley Jackson. I have already described this work in the previous chapter, but my students were assigned this work with a simple two-sentence summary. Perhaps I should have discussed it further beforehand. Thankfully, my students took to the work well, and it showed in their assignment, which was to quote and analyze three sections of Jackson's work.

The next text was *Depression Quest*. In the original incarnation of the class syllabus, I fully intended on tackling the issue of Gamergate, bringing the greater cultural discussion about identity politics and women in tech. This draft was made in 2016, which saw the very themes that I would address be brought back to the cultural consciousness. I should have kept this information in the class, challenging my students to witness the horror that was Gamergate. But I didn't. The 2016 Presidential Election had just concluded, and I wanted to forget about the experience. Therefore, I rationalized that the focus should be on *Depression Quest* and not the resulting mayhem that resulted after its publication. And it worked. While *My Body* did bring in a few interested students, *Depression Quest* was the first to really draw in the class, showing just what an electronic text could do that another work could not. Some students willingly played it more than once, just to see how different choices affected the protagonist's life or to try and give the protagonist a better life. And I deeply regret that this was all that they learned about the work, that I left out such an important cultural touchstone because of my own cowardice.

After a brief break, the class took a midterm. I posted three questions and had the students select two to answer with 500-750 word responses each. These questions focused on the three core sections of the course thus far: *Neuromancer*, the articles and

excerpts on electronic literature, and the two hypertext-based works. I should have better connected the works, articles, and excerpts, which would have tied all the information together more strongly. Alas, I could not figure out how to do it myself, so I left each section as is and let them figure it out for me. The students did well regardless, though they mostly restated arguments they had made in their forums previously.

The next week, we examined a few works by Young Hae-Chang Heavy Industries, specifically “The Art of Sleep,” “Ah,” and “What is an Intellectual?” I asked my students to write a response paper on one of the three works, but I also asked students to browse the main site for other works by the duo. Not only did I get all my students to read through and discuss many different word films on forums, I also got a delightful summary of over thirty different Young Hae-Chang Heavy Industries, which aided my own research. This was another assignment that the students enjoyed just as much as I did.

My weakest lesson was undoubtedly my week of e-poetry. Since so many works of electronic literature border on poetry, I tried to find a smattering of texts that most closely resembled traditional poetry. Up to that point, I had done little work with poetry or e-poetry, but I felt it was necessary to demonstrate how a new generation of poets have woven technology and language into a new style of wordplay. This section was a formality for me, something that had to be addressed to check all the required boxes. I gave the students a small collection of six poems and assigned them to write a short blurb about what they thought about two of them. I did no real instruction here (a misfortune begetting an online class), and my choices of works were rather meager in comparison to the prose texts.

After that week, we shifted to video games. I included an excerpt from Jesper Juul's *Half-Real* that focused on how games and narratives coincided with one another, but I neglected to incorporate it into any of the assignments. In fact, I was unsure how to broach the subject of "games as literature." I ultimately decided to simply introduce the works and let the students judge. The first game, Davey Wreden's *The Stanley Parable*, was received well enough by the students. I chose this one to illustrate how constrained narratives tend to be, especially if a player or reader is invited to participate. The students enjoyed the game's odd humor and took some of Wreden's deconstructions of game narratives to heart, but a more thorough introduction to the unit was needed.

Then we examined *Gone Home* by the Fulbright Company. Here, students explored an empty house, learning what transpired between Sam and her parents in the year since Kate (the protagonist) left to study abroad. The work is an exceptionally well-crafted homage to the early 90s, with references to *Street Fighter*, Lisa Frank notebooks, and 90s punk bands. Sam's story is told through diary entries the player encounters as they interact with objects in the creepy, empty house. They start innocuous enough as the confused emotions of a young, teenaged high schooler just trying to find her way through life. Eventually, Sam develops a crush on Ronnie, a classmate who is proud of her choice to join the military after high school. Sam's parents catch wind of this and fear that their relationship will end badly for them both. All of this is framed like a horror game, a genre that spiked in popularity around the game's release. And while it sets up a tragic ending, each trope is reversed. The bloody bathtub is just red hair dye. The red lights going to the attic are just decorative. Sam's "last entry" is of her leaving the diary for her sister to find while she goes with Ronnie to find somewhere they can be together. The students were

also able to find the two other stories hidden within the many objects scattered around the house, as they pieced together the failing marriage of Sam's parents, the mother's affair, and the father's alcoholism. Just letting the students explore proved to be the best move here, as it led the students to seek out the story and learn from it.

The following text, Toby Fox's *Undertale*, was originally scheduled to take three weeks of the course. The main reason for this is the game's three wildly different story paths: Neutral, Pacifist, and Genocide. Like in the previous games, I wanted to let the students explore on their own, make their own decision, and see what conclusions they drew from the text. Each week would give each student time to play through the game three times, since each run could take upwards of eight hours to do. To meet a rushed schedule, I compromised, allowing students to explore the game first (which nearly always ends in the Neutral ending) and then directing them to try the Pacifist and Genocide routes as they could.

In that first week, students played *Undertale*, a game where a person falls into the dark and mysterious Underground and must battle through hordes of monsters to defeat the monster king Asgore to return home. As one might expect, this is not such a simple story. Instead, *Undertale* gives players the option to negotiate, discuss, and talk their way out of battles, ending the fights non-violently. Choosing this option changes the story from a simple "hero must slay evil guy" to a complex narrative on discrimination, the use of violence, and uncovering a family tragedy. Doing the opposite—systematically eliminating every monster in the Underground to strengthen the player—leads to the Genocide ending, which literally destroys the world, corrupting the player's game to make it unplayable unless they forfeit their soul. Like *Spec Ops: The Line*, the Genocide

route repeatedly asks the player to reevaluate what they are doing and to ask themselves why they fight so hard to achieve such horrid ends.

My intent was that students would play the game three times. The first would be a general exploration of the Neutral route. What did everyone choose to do and why? Once again, I asked for a reaction paper to gauge their responses. As expected, the Neutral route seemed okay, at best. The other two routes really showcase the title's literary depth, so things would become clearer then, right? I was so naïve. Short on time, I crammed both the Pacifist and Genocide routes into two forum assignments, due within days of one another. I didn't expect the students to have the time to play through *Undertale* twice more, so I strongly recommended watching playthroughs online. Still, I overloaded the week, and my students were more than a little frustrated. One even sent me a very strongly worded email on the matter. At the time, I felt self-righteous, since I was getting so much hate for a work that advocates peaceful negotiations over aggression. But I now feel that I was overly harsh on that student. I expected too much.

Compounding all my issues in the second half of the course was the research paper. It was not due until the end of the semester, but students still had an eight-page paper to worry about in addition to the course load. I also neglected to factor in how the students did not have a familiarity with English courses, which often assign papers for students to explore a topic within a text of their choice. In this case, I asked them to perform a thorough examination of an electronic text. Most of the works they presented fit the electronic literature banner, but some students saw this paper as an opportunity to gush about their favorite video games, even after I urged that this was not going to be a

book report. Thankfully, roughly three-quarters of the papers submitted focused on researching a work and finding connections to larger cultural and societal issues within it.

The last week of lessons consisted of generative works, texts like *Façade* that utilized artificial intelligence or a procedure, such as Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de Poémes*. In addition to those two, I also added *Sunspring*, a short film written by an artificial intelligence that was performed by human actors. It is truly bizarre and nonsensical, but the most horrifying aspect of *Sunspring* is how it almost works. The grammar and language is a pure farce, but the plot feels familiar to fans of sci-fi films like *Star Trek* and *Alien*. Also included were some optional videos on William S. Burroughs' Cut-Up poems, where he chopped lines of poetry up and reassembled them, and David Bowie's use of the cut-up method in his own songs. This section could have easily worked in tandem with *Neuromancer* if I had placed it at the beginning of the semester and not the end, but on its own the students found it to be a nice diversion from the norm.

Finally, there was the final exam. I posited these three questions to my students:

1. What is electronic literature? Does it deserve a place in English departments, or should it be placed in a different field of academia? What are the unique characteristics of e-lit, and what are its drawbacks and advantages compared to traditional literature?
2. Should video games be treated as electronic literature? If so, explain how they should be utilized by academia. If not, explain why they would be a poor fit for academia. For either choice, use examples from the course and from your research to illustrate your points.
3. Can an artificial intelligence create art/literature? What makes something "art"? Should people use technology to help them create art (art programs, PhotoShop, etc.)? List three or four reasons to defend your stance on literature and A.I.

The first question was a repeat of one I had asked at the beginning of the semester, mostly to see if the students' attitudes had changed (they did). The second was self-

explanatory. Since many have questioned whether games should be considered literature in all cases or in specific ones, I wanted to see how the students would answer. Unfortunately, most of the students avoided this question, and this was most likely due to how little I stressed this topic. The final question held the most interest for the students, who reveled in discussing whether machines can carry the "spark" of creativity or not.

Overall, I was impressed. For my first attempt at designing and teaching my own class, the students were largely understanding and provided feedback where necessary. They may not have taken my enthusiasm for electronic literature as the gospel truth, but they did find out about a new and exciting world of literature that I hope they are still exploring. My only regret was not being a better teacher for them.

Other Electronic Literature Courses

My electronic literature studies course mirrored the English classes I had taken in my undergraduate years. I chose a selection of notable works, asked students to read and respond to them, and assigned a long-term project for the end of the semester. While I did get some inspiration from similar courses, the works I chose and their order of presentation were my decisions alone. I was also hampered by the online nature of the course, as the forums limited discussion. To provide some additional context for my course as well as a few alternatives, I will now discuss two sample syllabi for in-class courses centered around electronic literature.

Lori Emerson – "Freshman Advanced Composition"

The first, Lori Emerson's "Freshman Advanced Composition" at the Georgia Institute of Technology, was taught in-class three times a week and focused on pre-digital poetry. Namely, the aim of the course was to "attempt to reread bookbound poetry

throughout the twenty-first and twentieth century through the lens of the digital" (Emerson 1). This is a highly ambitious goal, especially for freshman students who may or may not go into English studies. The course utilized Sylvan Barnet and Hugo Bedau's *From Critical Thinking to Argument* as a key tool in instructing these young students in how to approach research-based essays and hone their critical eyes, and students spent much of the first week discussing chapters from the book.

For two weeks after this introduction, the class read numerous examples of digital poetry in addition to articles about the works and interviews with the authors. Extensive effort was placed in making the more abstract works more concrete in the minds of the students. Each day, one or two new works would be approached, all leading to a response paper due in the third week of the course. These papers allowed students to share their reactions with one of the works they had encountered thus far, giving them a chance to practice their critical thinking skills. In contrast, the research essays challenged students to write about a single author, examining their body of work and providing evidence to prove the paper's argument.

The following section on conceptual and procedural writing brought in the Oulipo school and others who made poetry through mathematical or sequential ways. One such work, "a fever is a warning" by Randy Prunty, consists of 2048 lines. Prunty began by writing the title line, adding a second, and continuing to double it by squeezing new lines between the old ones with one more at the end. It is suitably weird and extraordinarily long, but it epitomizes how writing poetry with a set of rules can still be strangely poetic if done well ("Randy Prunty). Emerson even invited Prunty to speak to the class about "fever" and other works. Emerson also invited the resident research librarian to educate

students on using the library and performing good research. Many college students are no doubt familiar with this, as many 1000-level courses heavily stress the use of the university library and the online database.

The class then studied sound and concrete poetry, focusing on Steve McCaffery's *Carnival* among other works. After, the students met at the multimedia studio and were introduced to a couple of programs utilized by digital poets while also studying objectivist poetry. This then led to a two-week discussion of futurism and Dada poets. Finally, the course discussed other precursors to digital poetry like film and art.

Within sixteen weeks, Emerson's class developed a thorough background on digital poetry, studied conceptual, procedural, and audio-visual poetry, and examined the objectivists, futurists, and Dada movements all while reading print and digital poems. Her course used multiple textbooks that were used throughout the semester and spent numerous class periods discussing each section. The class was also asked to lead discussions on the later subjects through group projects. These projects were only required to discuss the assigned literary movements, and students were given the freedom to present the topic through a collaborative essay, a blog, a video, or whatever the students felt would represent their topic the best. Given the creative nature of digital poetry, this assignment fit well.

Dr. Dene Grigar – "Special Topics in Digital Technology & Culture: Electronic Literature"

Taught at Washington State University-Vancouver, Dr. Dene Grigar's course on electronic literature differed from Emerson's in three key ways. First, it was geared toward Junior (3000-level) students who were already familiar with research techniques

and literature studies, which allowed the course to emphasize the study of the electronic texts. Second, the students were tasked with making electronic works themselves instead of just reading them. This assignment was like Emerson's group projects but with a creative focus rather than an informative one. Finally, the course also had a blog that would feature posts from various authors, poets, and critics in electronic literature circles. While not as immediately entertaining as inviting a poet to speak, the sheer number of guest articles makes up for the lack of discussion.

The first four weeks of the course quickly introduced students to electronic literature and prominent figures such as Hayles and Shelley Jackson. Included in this section was a trip to Grigar's MOVE lab, which contains many early works of electronic literature, works in progress, and multimedia experiences. Students also utilized the Electronic Literature Collection, a free online library of electronic works from around the world.

Weeks five through ten centered around letting students practice making their own works of electronic literature. Grigar introduced the class to one new program every week and then asked the students to use that program. The programs were the hypertext maker Dreamweaver, the video-editing software Final Cut, and Flash, the last being a highly popular software for digital authors and animators.

Weeks eleven to thirteen brought back the electronic works, but there was heightened attention on what separates electronic literature from print media. One such example was Stephanie Strickland's *True North*, which was published as a book of poetry and a hypertext. Another work, Brian Kim Stefans' "Star Wars, one letter at a time,"

mimicked the style of typewriters to show how laborious word processing was. Young Hae-Chang Heavy Industries' "Samsung" works were also showcased.

The final weeks of the class were spent working on a final project, which could range from a creative work of electronic literature to a 3000-word researched report on an author, genre, or theory of electronic literature. While not as open to suggestions as Emerson's group projects, this allowed the class to cater to both theoretically based students and creative writing students. In fact, the class could easily be rebranded as a creative writing course if need be.

Improving My Course

If I were to teach my course again, the first and most obvious improvement that could be made is the use of a central text. Since Grigar's class focused less on establishing a theoretical foundation for the students and more on the creative aspects of the works, there was little need for a core textbook. But Emerson's use of textbooks to augment class discussion is too remarkable to ignore, as it gave incoming students an opportunity to learn a skill together. My course was unfortunately predicated on the idea that the students would "figure it out" and learn by example. Without a set of readings to guide the online class, I fear that many of the students will have already forgotten about the works they examined and only remember the frustration that comes from abstraction without context. I already had excerpts of excellent texts—Aarseth's *Cybertext* and Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*—but neglected to use them beyond those initial snippets.

Using Murray's book as an example, I could organize the works to coincide with the different chapters. *Neuromancer* would mesh well with the dystopian worlds Murray

reviews in the introductory chapter. *The Stanley Parable* highlights the chapter on reader/player agency, *Gone Home* could demonstrate immersion theory, and *Undertale*'s transforming narrative pairs perfectly with Murray's chapter on transformation in digital narratives. *Hamlet on the Holodeck* could serve as a foundational text for the course, provided that time is taken to discuss each reading.

Another notable weakness of my course was the lack of electronic works. The two sample syllabi bombard students with examples and varying styles of electronic literature and digital poetry. My class had only sixteen works. Regardless of whether I believed the students could handle an increased course load, I was far too conservative in my selections. Gifted the opportunity to introduce students to a wide world of digital wonder, I squandered it on a sampling that was not wholly representative. Next time, I would utilize the Electronic Literature Collection, which currently holds three massive volumes of works, and assign multiple readings per week. Through repeated exposure to the vastness of the archives, they would be inspired to seek out additional works that interest them.

Bringing Electronic Literature into the Classroom

At ULM, most courses are taught using time periods as their framing device. "British Literature," "American Literature," and "World Literature" divide themselves around the 1800s. The first section attempts to force all relevant literary history into a single class, a simple enough feat for American literature but problematic for British and World literature. The second section churns through everything else that wasn't covered, usually focusing on Modernism as the major literary movement. The works chosen reflect the evolution of literature from the 1800s to the present day, of which electronic

texts take up a small portion. These are also courses geared towards Freshmen and Sophomores, and though they would be excited to learn about electronic literature, their efforts must lie in understanding the basics of literary studies.

Instead, I would recommend a trickle-down approach. This would begin with a Senior/Graduate-level course on electronic literature. While an online class could work, in-class discussions are vital to the long-term sustainability of the subject. As educators gain more confidence and familiarity with the course, the Junior classes could see electronic texts mentioned and potentially assigned in their courses. It is not a stretch to see how hypertext or art games could appear in “Contemporary American Fiction” or even “Science Fiction.” “Creative Writing” could form a separate class for digital texts or promote the creation of electronic works within the core section. “Romantic Literature” might dabble with the online role-playing game *Ever, Jane* while reading Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, and students would flock to read James Joyce’s *Ulysses* while exploring a digital rendition of that literary world in the VR experience *JoyceStick*. This, in turn, would allow time for electronic works to be anthologized along with their print counterparts, bringing both together for the Freshmen and Sophomores to pour over late in the second halves of their literature courses or even in their university-mandated Composition classes.

I do not expect this to be a quick or simple acclimation. New ideas take time to grow, but our Internet-connected world is moving at a pace we’ve never seen before. As we have seen with Norton’s incorporation of *afternoon, a story* in their postmodern American anthology, it won’t be long before more digital works find their way into our textbooks. If public, regional universities like the University of Louisiana at Monroe

pushed for more electronic literature, perhaps publishers and academia will accelerate the change.

Potential Problems and Solutions

I've alluded to this a few times throughout this thesis, but I will state it clearly now: academia needs to upgrade. Many of the public computers that students wind up using are half a decade old or more. ULM is no exception to this. A computer with a burned-in or broken screen is something we ignore. We get used to seeing fail-to-start messages on the computer we sit down at, groan when the one next to it won't power on, and are grateful that the third one only has a few dead pixels to deal with.

This is not to say that ULM and other public, regional universities should immediately spend hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of dollars on top-of-the-line computers with the best graphics cards, the highest quality mechanical keyboards, and 4K resolution displays. As astounding as that would be, it would only be a few years before those computers became damaged, broken, or obsolete. Only a university with a vast budget and income would be able to afford replacing all their computers, and that's without factoring in training in new versions of Windows and Mac OS, electricity costs, and replacement parts. No, this is just not a feasible request, especially with how little capital public universities have.

At minimum, universities should educate both students and faculty on basic computer usage and maintenance. I'd argue that there should be a required course on the subject. Everyone should know the language of computers, the dangers of the Internet, and how to troubleshoot technical issues. What about how the Internet works? Who runs the Internet? How do computers work? These simple facts are becoming increasingly

important to know as technology is swiftly guiding us to artificial intelligence, cybernetic limbs and implants, and volatile cryptocurrency markets. Of course, a Bachelor's of Arts degree at ULM is 120 hours, and those are filled with core classes of nearly every subject in addition to the classes the students choose to take as part of their degree plan. Something would have to be replaced to make room, and it would need to be a decision made with careful consideration.

Should a public, regional university come across a large sum of money (perhaps a generous donation) and decide to spend it on a tech upgrade, my recommendation would be to construct a digital media center or DMC. Many universities have either built or are in the process of building a DMC, where students can become familiar with technology and programs in a positive environment. I've already mentioned Washington State University—Vancouver's MOVE Lab which contains a "[d]esignated performance space; sound system; three Martin robotic lights; three HD projectors; 60' monitor; computers including MacPro, Mac Mini, three iMacs; Kinect Game System; Falcon Haptic Controller; Oculus Rift; [and] two Meta glasses" ("Fast Facts"). There is also The Johns Hopkins University's Digital Media Center, which lets students borrow game consoles, video and sound equipment, and other accessories for no charge. Students can also stay at the DMC itself to use software such as Final Cut Pro X, Adobe Creative Suite CC, and the Unity Game Engine ("jhu.edu"). Even Louisiana State University is building a DMC ("laetc.com"). These resources will be used by students of all majors, and though they are often small, the quality of the services provided will make up for their size.

Additional Resources

Anyone who wants to know more about electronic literature should contact the Electronic Literature Organization. This collective of digital preservationists, authors, critics, and enthusiasts hosts a yearly conference and many meetups at other literary gatherings. They also collect and update an online directory of pre-digital texts, individual works, and resources for curious writers. Their main page also contains links to other groups and partnerships like the Digital Humanities Summer Institute, Compute Canada, and the New Media Consortium.

For educators who wish to create their own electronic literature courses, I highly recommend browsing the companion website for N. Katherine Hayles' book *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. The syllabi that I covered in this chapter and many others can be found in the resources section, all written by prominent digital theorists and authors such as Stuart Moulthrop (*Victory Garden*). This Hayles text would also work as a core textbook, as each copy comes with a CD containing the entirety of the Electronic Literature Collection, Volume One. If the textbook does not fit the style or scope of the course, one can still order free copies of this first collection from the Electronic Literature Organization, and the websites for all three volumes are free to access.

Astrid Ensslin's book *Literary Gaming* elaborates more on how "auteur" or art games combine literary experiences with meaningful gameplay. She asserts that art games draw players in with their gameplay but also "confront [them] with the seemingly irreconcilable clash between hyper and deep attention," making players choose between playing the game optimally or slowing down and reading each section for its literary

value (Ensslin 39). Paired with a series of games that do just that (i.e. *Spec Ops: The Line*, *Undertale*), *Literary Gaming* would be perfect for electronic literature courses or classes on game design and narrative.

Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds by Jesper Juul was one of the texts I used during my course, and I still highly recommend it. Picking up where Aarseth left off, Juul dissects the mechanics of games, how they affect players, and where the "rules" really lie. Unlike Aarseth's more mathematical approach, Juul boils down the inherent complexity of programming languages, game mechanics, and hidden systems.

Those interested in digital poetry will find no better resource than C.T. Funkhouser. *Prehistoric Digital Poetry: An Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995* was instrumental in piecing together the history of electronic literature. While this book's focus is on physical texts that were touched by the digital, though not necessarily digital-born, its companion piece *New Directions in Digital Poetry* operates almost exclusively on those digital-born works. With these two texts and a gathering of digital poems, a digital poetry class could be formed.

Electronic literature is just a small section of the digital humanities, and there are plenty of resources for learning more about this broader topic. The City University of New York (CUNY) published an updated edition of *Debates in the Digital Humanities* in 2016, which acts as both an introduction to the subject and an examination of its many moving parts. Both versions are available online for free, as well. I also recommend *Doing Digital Humanities*, an anthology of articles edited by Constance Crompton, Richard J. Lane, and Ray Siemens. It not only contains Hayles and Grigar's "Electronic

Literature" articles but also discussions of critical code studies, game design, scholarly communication, and multilingual studies.

Conclusion

The most important question I have faced with this thesis is this: "Is electronic literature really *literature*?" Put differently, do electronic works belong in the same category as traditional print? For the past three years, I've argued that it does, but I feel that I should be a bit more rational about this. I believe that electronic literature *is* a literary form, one that mixes together all the myriad technologies that have been birthed in the past half-century with the languages that shape our stories and our lives. That said, it walks a grey area; it is at once a performance, an art installation, and a novel. These works draw readers in, invite them to explore their depths, and offer depths as complex as the code that creates them. I can no longer say that electronic works are in the same category as print literature.

Instead, I think we need to broaden our idea of what literature is. I put forward this definition: literature is an art form that uses a language (or multiple languages) to tell a narrative that reflects deeper truths about our humanity, the world around us, our anxieties, and our dreams. It's not a perfect definition, but this encompasses more knowledge than the current one allows, since it includes oral tradition, the play as performance, audio recordings, short stories, novels, cinema, electronic texts, and those works that have yet to be created. This should not be the final definition of what literature is or isn't, but it is a start, at least.

And by no means should this thesis be considered a full analysis of electronic literature. There are theories that I would like to discuss in greater detail, works that I

think everyone should take a moment to sift through, and important people working in this growing field that need to be known. Given more time and research, this could be a dissertation, a book, or even an ongoing series. But new electronic works are published every day, and new critics and authors are making their presence known to the world. Electronic texts may fall from favor like hypertext or rocket to fame once more. In either case, authors, artists, programmers, designers, and novices will continue to find unique ways of telling their stories again and again.

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