

Introducing Small Screen Fictions

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The emergence of a truly electronic narrative art form awaits the pooling of a communal genius, a gathering of cultural impulses, of vernacular technologies, and most importantly of common yearnings which can find neither a better representation nor a more satisfactory confirmation than what electronic media offer. (Joyce 228)

The above quote, from digital fiction pioneer Michael Joyce’s “Forms of the Future,” nearly trembles on the page with anticipation. “Pooling,” “gathering,” “yearnings”—these earnest sentiments gesture hopefully, with almost religious energy, to a future that had not yet arrived at the time of Joyce’s writing (2003). Almost fifteen years later it is perhaps still premature to claim that a “truly electronic narrative art form” has been perfected, but the future that Joyce anticipated is much more tangible now than it was then.

In the past few decades, digital technologies have dramatically reconfigured not only the circumstances of media production and dissemination, but also many of their cultural forms and conventions, including the roles of users, producers, authors, audiences, and readers. Arguably the most spectacular of these digital transformations have affected the large screens of cinema multiplexes and the increasingly large screens of home televisions, but other, no less popular and perhaps even more pervasive narrative forms have emerged on a range of smaller screens as well. One-and-a-half decades after Joyce heralded the fusion of creative forces, the confluence of cultural idiosyncracies, the convergence of user-friendly technologies, as well as the ever-growing popular demand for novelty and agency in the modes and media of storytelling, we have reached a juncture where electronic trans-media have come to dominate our narrative ecologies. We are surrounded by and submerged in storytelling devices, which enable us as *pro-sumers* to blend fact and fiction, to combine naturally and artificially generated

information, as well as to publicize and appropriate narrative forms in unforeseen ways, and often with unforeseeable effects.

Today, with growing frequency, narratives are experienced on the smaller screens of laptops, tablets, and even mobile phones, which in turn become “all-purpose reading machines” (Tosca and Pedersen 358) that shape the ways in which our bodies and minds interact with narrative meanings. Narratives that we peruse via small screens typically involve direct reader/viewer/player interaction, enabling highly idiosyncratic, individualized, and unique narrative experiences. Some of these fictions are merely digitized or wikified versions of texts previously available in the codex form; their digital conversion affects some of the ways in which readers engage with them, but the basic structures of these narratives remain unchanged. Some others, however, have been written and designed (these two concepts often blur) specifically for interactive small screens. The functionalities and affordances of these digital-born fictions (see Bell et al.) are not replicable in any other medial form; nor can they be made manifest in any printed form; nor do they demonstrate an allegiance to any single pre-existing art form. It is within the idiosyncratic nature of small screen fictions that they embrace the experimental uses of the tools in and for which they are written, and that they give rise to ever new ways of gestural manipulations (Bouchardon). They allow us to explore new ways of using parts or functions of our bodies—be it our hands and fingers, voice, breath, or even brain waves and full-body motion—in combination with exploratory-noematic strategies of reading and play. By the same token, small screen fictions accentuate and foreground the playful nature of reading and situate it in contexts and settings conventionally reserved for immersive video gaming, for example.

The contributions to this special issue of *Paradoxa* seek to capture and exemplify some of these trends. They range from in-depth analyses of individual texts, to theoretical and philosophical discussions, and to empirical reader-response studies. They span a diversity of different platforms and genres, from narrative videogames and ludic, gamelike fictions using 3D immersive environments, touchscreen technologies, or more traditional mouse-and-keyboard combinations; to participatory social media narratives; networked and locative narratives; interactive graphic novels; interactive hypermedia, including haptic and augmented reality fictions. Furthermore, the articles compiled in this collection show that small screen fictions appeal to a variety of target audiences, from indie gamers to bloggers, and from pre-school children with a propensity for canonical cartoon characters to mature adults with an interest in exploring the depths of human trauma through palimpsestically layered, symbolic landscapes.

Thematically, our authors examine the changing cultural and demographic patterns and expectations of engagement with digital narrative; they evaluate the shifting and conflicted roles and power relationships revolving around concepts of co- and fan authorship in narrative creation and construction as well as the economic, cultural, social, and political contexts of authoring and reading networked narratives. Some of these authors address the role of touch and tactility, as well as other human senses in experiencing embodied narrative; they consider the material implications of reading and interacting with code-generated works; they discuss the convergence of historical philosophical and avant-garde thought from the Sublime to contemporary bookishness (Pressman). These essays address the affordances and cognitive effects of multilinear, fragmented storytelling, particularly in relation to narrative hypothesis formation and forensic reading; they reflect upon the challenges associated with theorizing and analyzing ludo-literary and ludo-narrative artefacts that necessitate alternative, cross-disciplinary yet simultaneously medium-specific hermeneutic frameworks. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the texts collected here each shed light on individual facets of how the meanings and our perceptions of fiction, genre, and literature are bound to transform in light of the textual, perceptive, and interactive phenomena under investigation.

We have divided this issue into four sections that, to us, reflect some of the key trends within current electronic literature and digital fiction research: children's e-literature; gaming fictions; networked narratives; and old/new aesthetics for the small screen. To flout what we perceive as a frustrating tendency in academic organizations, we perform an act of un-*niche*-ing and begin this issue with a section titled "Children's E-lit." Oftentimes, (electronic) literature for young people is sidelined at conferences and in curatorial planning, indicating that this emergent field of research might be of somewhat lesser scholarly quality or significance than other, more established academic discourses. We specifically solicited contributions in and on this fast evolving subfield of literary and media scholarship to signal the importance of academic engagement with emergent forms of literacy. We also wish to draw attention to fictional genres that will increasingly shape the creative imagination and storytelling habits of generations that will come to dominate scholarly, educational, and cultural discourses in decades to come. Part 1 therefore starts with Sara Tanderup, who questions the still existing dichotomy between literature in print and electronic narratives by examining William Joyce's transmedial children's story, *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*. While this work may *prima facie* be seen as a nostalgic celebration of print culture, it is

ultimately a (partly diachronic) amalgamation of animated short film, picture book, story app, and augmented reality app. Tanderup explores how the work reflects tensions between media nostalgia and the playful explorations afforded by small screen technologies.

In the subsequent essay, “Children Making Meaning with Literary Apps: a 4-year-old Child’s Transaction with *The Monster at the End of This Book*,” Aline Frederico adopts an empirical reader-response approach to studying children’s story-app fiction. Informed by theories of social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis, she analyzes how meaning is constructed multimodally in Stone and Smollin’s *Monster* app through the lens of Hallidayan metafunctions. Her study investigates how children, aided by parental explanations, responded to various aspects of the narrative, sometimes adhering to the meanings intended by the creators of the text and sometimes subverting them by bringing their own expectations, intentions, and experience to the reading event.

With her contribution, “A Chinese Cluster: Danish-Born Digital Comic as Source for Transmedia Design and Innovation,” Sarah Mygind then offers a culturally specific reading of a “digital comic,” *The Shanghai 1927 Project*, whose primary audience is comprised of teenagers, “an age-group that is generally considered digital-literate and media-savvy.” In conversation with critical work by N. Katherine Hayles and others, Mygind positions this work within the context of “new digital literature,” discusses the tensions between hypermediacy and transparency that it expresses, and uses it as an exemplum of what she terms a “cluster work,” i.e., “a configuration of transmedia practice” as it applies to the production of children’s e-lit in Denmark.

The closing piece of this first section is an interview with children’s e-lit writer, scholar, and curator, Mark Marino. In it, Marino announces the arrival of a “golden age for digital fiction for children,” afforded by touchscreen apps like the Inkle Writer in recent years, but first signaled by multimodal Flash fictions like the diachronic, episodic *Inanimate Alice* (Pullinger et al.). He tells us how his own children’s writing evolved into co-authored works, involving his target audience as key contributors to narrative development. He notes distinct elements of bookishness in children’s e-lit, as well as the often underestimated need for linearity and authorial narration in children’s co-writing. Ultimately, he reports, a good digital fiction is one that children will want to re-read (Ciccoricco), to explore paths yet undisclosed.

Part 2 of this issue, “Gaming Fictions,” focuses on intersections between reading and gameplay. In “The Author Interface: Rethinking Authorship through Ludoliterary Analysis of *The Stanley Parable* and *The Beginner’s Guide*,” Ryan House introduces the changing concepts

of authorship. Focusing on two popular experimental narrative games by indie game developer, Davey Wreden, he revisits the Barthesian notion of the *writerly text* from a functional ludostylistic (Ensslin) point of view. Focusing on Wreden's rhetorical and game design choices, House aims to broaden our conception of the Author in digital media and to demonstrate that a strong authorial presence does not necessarily discourage reader-player participation but instead actively encourages cognitive engagement with innovative literary, metafictional, and metaludic experiences.

The next essay, Stuart Moulthrop's "Deep Time in Play," introduces Siegfried Zielinski's notion of "deep time." Moulthrop offers a sustained meditation about how Deep Time manifests in ways that are specific to digital gaming narratives, through an explication of Valve's *Portal* franchise, John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse*, and The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home*. Moulthrop's expert excavation of these digital narratives demonstrates their transhistoric importance, not merely to games, but to the history and development of modern literary aesthetics. "Objects have histories," Moulthrop reminds us. His brilliant analysis demonstrates how these histories refract, inform each other, and cut across time.

The final contribution to Part 2 is Karlien van den Beukel's essay, "*Fallen London*: Authorship and Game Allegory." *Fallen London* is an interactive role-playing game narrative told in thousands of static text frames and set in an alternative Victorian London. Despite its distinct *fin-de-siècle* flavor, the game has been consistently interpreted as historical and political allegory. Van den Beukel examines the question of authorship and its role in sustaining the allegorical potential. To do so, she considers three distinct dimensions of its narrative: Alexis Kennedy's authorship; the game's remediations of the the 19th-century literary life; and the communal storytelling enacted both in-game and extra-diegetically on *FL*'s social media.

Part 3, "Networked Narratives," zooms in on different aspects of narrative (dis)connectivity, online or offline. Joshua Hussey's essay, "The Image of Agglutination, or Many Small Screens Chained Together," conceptualizes videogame narratives as a compound string of information and examines features of narrative assembly in Merritt Kopas' *Obéissance* and Sam Barlow's *Her Story*. Focusing on the language of small screen visual content, he proposes explicit utterances as units of these compound strings and puts forward a sample *grammar* based on the player's lexical experiences.

In "Charting Paths: Networks and a Mobile Aesthetic Practice in Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph's *Flight Paths* and Megan Heyward's

of day, of night,” Kristine Kelly considers the use of migrancy and mobility within networked narratives. Focusing on the local, personal journeys explored in *of day, of night*, as well as on the larger set of global relations suggested in *Flight Paths*, Kelly considers mobility as an aesthetic trope that both challenges and conforms to the totalizing authority of larger systems of organization. Read in conversation with postcolonial criticism and network theory, Kelly acknowledges that “networks elude critique and resist holistic or stable assessment,” even as close readings of networked narratives demonstrate the potential of the network to reshape power structures.

In the third contribution to this section, David Meurer offers a multi-layered analysis of Eli Horowitz et al.’s *The Silent History*, a touchscreen fiction that incorporates user-generated fictional content without compromising the intelligibility, coherence, or stylistic unity of the core narrative. Employing narrative theory, network analysis, and close reading, Meurer examines the media-specific reciprocity between discourse, interactive architecture, user interface, character network, and participatory cultural production, drawing attention to topological complementarities that support networked participation and evoke “conditions of presence.”

Part 3 closes with an interview with another world-leading figure in electronic literature scholarship: Dene Grigar is President of the Electronic Literature Organization. Her work is based on the premise, “making is not separate from thinking.” It focuses on various essential aspects of theoretical, creative, and applied e-lit scholarship and includes creation, curatorship, curation, and preservation. In this contribution, Grigar talks about her professional and academic trajectory, her views on how electronic literature—and digital fiction in particular—has transformed over the years, what her hopes and projections are for its future, and what kinds of works inspire her imagination. She also initiates us into the genesis of and motivations behind her vital preservation initiative and “labor of love,” the Pathfinders project.

The final part of this issue contains contributions that develop and employ combinations of old and new, established and innovative aesthetics for the small screen. The first essay, by Meredith Dabek, “Replies, Retweets, and Reblogs: Modes of Participation in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*” examines the titular multi- and transmedial adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, which transformed the original linear print novel into a dispersed and multi-directional cybertext distributed over multiple channels on YouTube, Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook. Navigating this jungle of forking paths with no single entry point, Dabek focuses on the modes and avenues of engagement that

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries offers to its cyber-readers, drawing particular attention to sharing, interaction, and creation.

In “Touching the Page of the Small Screen: Haptic Narratives and ‘Novel’ Media,” the second article in the section, Caleb Milligan focuses on the tactility of digital texts, a dimension that is often neglected in discussions about them. Milligan asserts the importance of touch in experiencing app versions of such texts as Tom Phillips’s *A Humument*, Steve Tomasula’s *TOC*, and Tender Claws’ *PRY*, and argues for the haptic perspective as a crucial aspect of the readers’ relationship with small screen narratives and their perceptive novelty.

Part 4 concludes with James O’Sullivan’s “‘The dream of an island’: *Dear Esther* and the Digital Sublime,” a close-reading of Dan Pinchbeck’s game-like text that is often credited as the progenitor of the genre of walking simulators. Drawing on Burke’s and Kant’s aesthetic theories, O’Sullivan considers *Dear Esther* as an instance of sublimity, here reconceptualized for the digital realm, and an aesthetic space: not only because of its stunning visuals but thanks to the text’s desire to be received as—to cite the designer’s words—“a dream.”

Instead of an Afterword, we are honored to be able to offer a creative-critical piece by American novelist and digital fiction author, Steve Tomasula. He is perhaps best known for his revolutionary multimodal work, *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*, and *TOC: A New-Media Novel*—one of the few DVD-based digital fictions traded by an established academic press. Titled “Vast Landscapes, Small Screens, & Altered Perspectives,” Tomasula rounds up this publication with an invitation to take us on a trip down technology lane, where he reflects upon how small screens have transformed the virtual and material landscapes we inhabit, and how they augment and refigure contemporary nomadic culture.

The publication of this special issue of *Paradoxa* on the topic of “Small Screen Fiction” does not claim to fulfill Joyce’s prophecy for a completely settled, fully formalized, and wholly actualized notion of electronic literature. Rather, it hopes to celebrate the lively and diverse forms of digital narrative that this field welcomes within its fold, and to identify important trends, tendencies, and overlapping interests as our field continues to evolve.

TECHNICAL NOTE: This issue of *Paradoxa* comes with a companion website located at <<http://smallscreenfictions.net>>. The site features extensive visual material impossible to reproduce in the hard copy. There are two ways to access this material. When scanned with any phone- or tablet-based barcode/QR code reader app, the QR codes typeset in the articles will lead to high-resolution images and video clips

online. Alternatively, the readers can visit the companion website and manually browse images linked from the table of contents. All images are accompanied by the same captions that are attached to QR codes in the journal.

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