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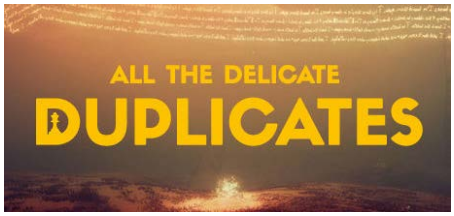
Electronic Literature’s Contemporary Moment: Breeze and Campbell’s “All the Delicate Duplicates”

By James O’Sullivan

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ALMOST A DECADE has passed since *3:AM Magazine* founder Andrew Gallix, writing in the *Guardian*, proclaimed the imminent death of electronic literature, that is, literature with an inherently computational aesthetic. There was some merit to Gallix’s

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argument, his concern being that the form's emphasis on multi-modality was such that the word would eventually get lost. In many instances — say, where play is accentuated — this has indeed been the case. But today, for every work of e-lit that is more game than *literary* game, there are those pieces where language remains essential. *All the Delicate Duplicates*,the latest brainchild of Mez Breeze and Andy Campbell, is a superlativeexample of the latter, and thus a serious rebuke of Gallix's assertion.

Electronic literature can be a lot of things — literary games, hypertexts, interactive fiction, generative poetry, bots — but it is always more than the product of digitization; ebooks, which merely mimic print on a screen, typically don't count. E-lit relies on computational affordances for creative expression, privileging language within a constellation of modalities. Still, resistance to its charms endures.

Responding to Gallix's provocation in a piece published in the *Electronic Book Review* , Dene Grigar, current president of the Electronic Literature Organization, points to those barriers that have marginalized e-lit in classrooms and popular culture, arguing that resistance to the form emanates from "deeply-held views of the proper relationship between humans and machines, of what constitutes the good, the beautiful and the true, and of the nature of art." In many respects, such barriers persist, and electronic literature has generally remained marginalized among publishers, critics, and institutions of education. It has, however, crept into popular culture, and its readers don't even know it.

At Washington State University Vancouver, there is a densely packed room in the heart of the campus that resembles something of a Mac museum. It is Grigar's Electronic Literature Lab, and it holds what is possibly the greatest collection of first-generation e-lit in the Western world. Grigar has dedicated her career to ensuring that future generations know that this stuff existed — she does so because she loves it and wants to see it survive. Electronic literary history is already fractured, with many of the canon's earliest works now rendered obsolete as a consequence of their reliance on defunct proprietary formats. The ELL contains a wide catalog of e-lit works, largely from the

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1980s and '90s, alongside the hardware required to experience them as their authors/creators/coders intended.

Grigar has also worked with University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor and e-lit pioneer Stuart Moulthrop (*Victory Garden*,1992) on the aptly named Pathfinders project, which seeks to preserve the experience of first-generation e-lit works through author interviews and reader traversals. Their work has done much to secure the legacy of the field, and it is a good thing, too, considering electronic literature's newfound significance. Someday soon, a lot of gamers may realize that they are in fact readers, and both they and scholars oftheir favored form will want access to that origin story.

The Chinese Room's *Dear Esther*, released commercially in 2012, is arguably the most well-known and critically acclaimed instance of a new genre of game that is often described as "walking simulator." Walking simulators are precisely what you'd expect: games where you walk somewhere, with few, if any, objectives to accomplish on the way. They are games from which the hallmarks of gamification are glaringly absent, and that is because they are solely focused on something else — story.

In the e-lit community — particularly in the ELO-centered NorthAmerican and European contexts — electronic literature is still dominated by works that rely on web technologies; there aren't a whole lot of practitioners creating literary games in a way that is conducive to mass-market appeal. This is problematic, because if the form is to overcome those limitations identified by Grigar, it needs to do so with a bit of aggression, forcing its way into the minds of those audiences that have neglected it to date. Most people are scared by the literary, and so the idea of a *literary* game conjures memories of dreary schooldays spent wrangling with works that the general public tends to view as intentionally obscure. Games are far less threatening and so present a suitably furtive way of slipping some decent literature into the public consciousness. The e-lit community is comprised of many accomplished authors and artists, but it is in Mez Breeze and Andy Campbell — two of contemporary electronic literature's finest practitioners — that we find the collaboration that has most

visibly embraced the potential of this moment. Their title *All the Delicate Duplicates*, released earlier this year, is the most compelling example of a literary game — in the colloquial sense of the word *game* —to have emerged from this community. It is precisely what emerging authors/artists in this space should be seeking to duplicate.

In *Duplicates*, the reader largely interacts with the gameworld through the first-person perspective of John, a computer engineer and single parent. John and his daughter Charlotte have inherited a set of objects from a relative named Mo, and it is through interaction with these objects that the narrative progresses. This narrative diverges across three time zones — 2006, 2011, and 2016 — accessed through John's kitchen, which acts as a gateway to the house where most of the story is set. The state of the house indicates to readers which time zone they are in. Many forms of electronic literature are inherently hypertextual, in that readers traverse a narrative space bidding to encounter lexia, or the next significant reveal. *Duplicates* is a layered hypertext in which the switch between time zones gives readers the sense that they are traversing a familiar path. This premise is established from the outset,when the radio that is playing as readers first enter the kitchen in 2006 features commentary on relativity and the potential for multiverses: "What is now? What is space?" the voice asks. These are the questions that Breeze and Campbell seek to explore, and they've chosen the ideal form for such a task.

It is common within this domain to encounter works of magic realism, wherein the computer offers some transformation that jolts the reader and enacts the marvellous. If an artist is to maximize the effects of this genre, a principally realistic view of the world must be established before the supernatural is imposed. Identifiable scenes are no longer enough to evoke familiarity — one cannot present a kitchen or living room and expect contemporary audiences to become immersed; elements of the real must be present. I am referring to aspects such as light, the *feel* of a gamespace as something surreal that was captured as opposed to created. The world of *Duplicates* is *real*,it is a world of ironing boards and trash bags, domesticity and disorder. As readers traverse the narrative, they are consumed by the quiet of the living room and the shadows in the attic as though these spaces are mirrors of their own spaces and domestic

experiences. Accomplishing such a feat does not require a budget of AAA proportions. It requires an advanced artistic touch, nuances of texture and shading.



from “All the Delicate Duplicates”

The world of *Duplicates* is rife with symbolism — fire, glass, the female body — all of which is rendered visually, with a full complement of rich sounds and sharp narrative transpositions. These fragments that populate the work’s hypertextual layering are bound together by language, the spectral words reminiscent of the styleencountered in Breeze and Campbell’s *The Dead Tower* (2012). It is in this sense that *Duplicates* remains a *literary* game rather than just a game.

Duplicates represents the culmination of the Breeze-Campbell alliance that previously produced *Tower* and *#PRISOM* (2013). These precursors are set in the type of “three-dimensional” gameworld that most contemporary players expect from transmedia fiction, incorporating language as something of a floating specter or echoed refrain intended to prompt readers as they navigate the narrative space. *Tower* is created using Flash, which has long been one of

the field's most utilized instruments, whereas *#PRISOM* saw the authors progressing to the more sophisticated Unity engine, which demonstrated their ambition to maximize the aesthetic affordances of the machine. *Duplicates* is even more ambitious, in that it offers readers a modally multifaceted and technically complex gameworld that is distributed via Steam's commercial marketplace. A common topic of discussion among e-lit practitioners is how the community might go about commodifying its outputs as a means of supporting its artists. Breeze and Campbell have the answer: create something that appeals to the literary and gaming communities alike, and make the quality such that you can justify charging for it.

But the achievements of *Duplicates* are not just contextual. If Breeze and Campbell are to be commended for any aspect of their ambition, it should be for their efforts to juxtapose the literary and the digital in a manner that genuinely advances the field and forcefully responds to naysayers such as Gallix that, no, electronic literature is not dead, it is everywhere, it is thriving, and it is *literary*. Ten years ago, the future of electronic literature was legitimately being questioned. Ten years from now, I expect that we will be reflecting on the present moment as that which saw the form truly begin to build on the work of its pathfinders — to borrow from Grigar and Moulthrop — and progress toward its potential, both as an aesthetic experience and as an act of expression capable of permeating the public consciousness. There is little doubt that such reflection will place much focus on the work of Mez Breeze and Andy Campbell, the pathfinders of their day.

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