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Literary Games, Walking Simulators and the New Wave of Digital Fiction

James O'Sullivan

Think of a videogame, any videogame. In doing so you will probably think of objectives and rules, what you must do in said game, and the artificial constraints within which such must be done.[1] Rules and objectives are what make a game. Now think of a novel, any novel. The likelihood is that you are thinking of a printed book and its many pages of text. You are possibly thinking of the story contained within said book, some character, or maybe the style of the prose. Maybe you are thinking about some material aspect, like its length or the physicality of a particular edition. Whatever the novel, it is a work of narrative fiction with its events portrayed (possibly) in chronological order and its pages consumed (probably) in a linear fashion. Think of some digital fiction, some combination of these two familiar forms, and matters become surprisingly more complicated.

When we think of a narrative form, any form, there are generalised—if not even fundamental—structures and logics that facilitate the broad typological classification that dominated literary theory in the fifties (Stanzel 1986, 1). While most theorists have moved on from the work of categorising literary forms, the field of digital literature—still very much in its infancy relative to its print counterparts—has spent the last two or three decades codifying twentieth and twenty-first century experiments in computer-centric creative expression and writing.[2] Digital literature—or what is often referred to as "electronic literature"—is inherently born-digital, it is not, to echo the words of Bouchardon, print which has been remediated (or merely transferred) to a screen:

> We can retain the idea that the mere fact of being produced on a computer is not enough to characterize digital literature. Digital literature uses the affordances of the computer to dynamically render the story. If an e-reader simply displays text in the way a printed book displays text—the only difference being that to advance the text one scrolls rather than turns a page—this is not 'digital literature.' It is printed work digitized for optimal display in a portable computational environment. Digital literature is algorithmic. It changes as the reader engages it. (2016, 3).

Ensslin provides a more succinct definition: digital literature does not include 'paper-under-glass forms of digital writing that can be printed without losing their specific aesthetic appeal' (2014, 3).

In a broad historical sense, the 'first generation' of digital literature, or certainly, the experimentation which led to such, might be seen as having transpired between the early-fifties and mid-nineties, initially through early programming languages like BASIC and Pascal, and later with personal computing software such as HyperCard and INFORM (Flores 2021, 29). Digital literature's 'second generation' came with the rise of the Internet, and indeed, interactive technologies and tools—HTML, JavaScript, Flash—that allowed a growing number of practitioners with access to computers to produce web-based literary art (Flores 2021, 30). One could granularise these epochs further, but in a general sense, digital literature began with early, inaccessible computers and mainframe machines like the Ferranti Mark 1 and Siemens System 4004, with Fortran and floppies, before reinventing itself as Net Art distributed across the emerging Web (O'Sullivan and Grigar 2019).

Periodisation becomes more complicated when it comes to digital literature's possible 'third generation'. Flores contends this third generation is 'based on social media networks and widely adopted platforms and apps', citing 'Twine games, Twitter bots, Instagram poetry, GIFs, and image macro memes' as examples (2021, 30–31). But if this is all that third-generation digital literature has to offer, perhaps the form never really progressed beyond its Flash moment.[3] Twine is simply the next Storyspace,[4] an intuitive application for authoring rudimentary hypertexts, while Twitter bots usually amount to little more than neat demonstrations of linguistic automation, very little of which might be considered literary to the extent that it warrants more than a cursory glance. Flores notes that bots are an interesting genre in that they have crossed digital literature's generational divide (2021, 31)—in the sixties and seventies we had early chatbot experiments such as ELIZA, whereas now we have Twitter bots. But compared to such antecedents from decades before, Twitter bots represent something of a regression; they might well be digital literature, but it is difficult to see how they might be considered *new*, or even rejuvenation of something old. Equally, forms such as Instagram poetry, GIFs and memes, despite having 'stepped away from the page', are still firmly seated in the logic of print: they are narratologically fixed, with both story and structure at the surface level. And print aside, it is certainly difficult to see the difference between Instagram poetry and many second-generation web-based works.

But Flores is less concerned with narrative formalities, arguing instead that the third-generation's most significant advance is in its disseminative possibilities, in the ways in which social media platforms can be leveraged by authors who want to circulate their work to huge audiences (2021, 30). Why develop a bot from scratch when you can take a hugely popular platform like Twitter and make it the bot? Perverse engineering such platforms for literary purposes—particularly platforms developed with profit-making agendas—is an inherently artistic, even subversive act. 'Perverse engineering' is the process by which practitioners take some profit-motivated product or service and manipulate its functions to fulfil their artistic intentions (see O'Sullivan 2019b, 53). Twitter bots are a good example of perverse engineering, as they turn a tool designed to facilitate general communications between users into something more expressive, and in doing so, confuse the platform's discourse, so essential to the data mining that sustains Twitter economically. But once again, there is nothing particularly new in this; digital literature has a long and rich tradition of technological appropriation, using found technologies—in other words, whatever is available and intuitive—to assemble literary things (O'Sullivan 2019b, 54, 65–66). What Twitter is to the current generation of authors is no more radical than what Storyspace and diskettes were to their predecessors. That is not to say that Flores is wrong: the emergence of the platforms he cites is of course radical in a whole manner of respects, but it is not new, it is not, in the context of digital literature, generation defining.

Digital Fiction's New Wave

Perhaps digital literature never made it to its third generation, or is way past it;[5]perhaps digital literature is already dead; perhaps it never really was. Such is the argument advanced by Gallix in a 2008 article for *The Guardian*. His contention is that digital literature, in its current form, is so reliant on modalities beyond language, that it is no longer convincingly *literary*, but rather, more like 'digitally-processed intermedia art'[6] with 'less and less to do with literature' (Gallix 2008). Gallix does not think this negative, on the contrary, he thinks this a consequence of digital literature finally freeing itself from the 'generic limitations' of literature which held back those early experiments in digital writing:

> Although interesting, its early manifestations were hardly groundbreaking. Collaborative narratives are as old as literature itself. Generative poetry simply adds a technological twist to Tzara's hat trick, the surrealists' automatic writing or Burroughs' cut-ups.

> Interactive fiction has its roots in Cervantes and Sterne. Hypertexts seldom improve on gamebooks like the famous Choose Your Own Adventure series, let alone BS Johnson's infamous novel-in-a-box. Besides, if you really want to add sound and pictures to words, why not make a film? (Gallix 2008)

While it has been well over a decade since Gallix penned his short yet provocative critique, one can imagine that he has been equally underwhelmed by the literary quality of Twitter bots and GIFs or the radicalism of Instagram poetry. Gallix might, however, see some merit in a type of digital literature that has come to be known as 'literary games'. Literary games could well be described as 'digital intermedia art', but they could also, far more than is the case with the aforementioned forms, be seen as *literature*.

It is in literary games that we find digital literature's third generation, and not just any literary game—one could attempt to argue that there are ludic aspects to every type of social media—but highly immersive, narrative-driven titles that take advantage of the latest technologies for creating, rich, visual, gamespaces. The walking simulator genre most appropriately represents the type of work being referred to here, pieces such as *Dear Esther* (2012) and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2015), both developed by The Chinese Room, a videogame studio based in Brighton. Literary games like walking simulators are what readers should expect from contemporary digital literature—they are richly immersive in the virtual sense, using state-of-the-art technologies to create storyspaces that warrant the mantle of "digital". It is the twenty-first century: digital fiction based on outmoded platforms and aesthetics just seems inherently unconvincing as radical art. Flores warns against "distinctions like classic and contemporary because contemporary is an open-ended concept that needs to be continuously adapted when there's a shift in practices" (2021, 28–29), but such historicisation is essential to literary criticism. How can we assess the significance of any present moment without giving some thought to past aesthetics and cultural production? Framing practices as "contemporary" is not about the *new*, but the *now*, the intentional consideration of the temporal-dependencies of art; the specific cultural conversations, contexts, and technēs of the day. An art that has no contemporary moment is an art that has not progressed. And Twitter bots and pictures shared on social media just do not cut it right now. Walking simulators, however, do.

The first-generation of digital literature, contrary to Gallix's position, was groundbreaking.[7] To suggest that early hypertextual fiction merely replicated the Choose Your Own Adventure series betrays a lack of appreciation for the long lineage of forms and experiments in such upon which all literature is based. Similarities can be drawn between any literary form—digital, print, or otherwise—and something which came before.[8] Digital literature's first-generation authors saw the potential in computers, scientific instruments that were not designed with art in mind, to remake existing literary practices—that is the very definition of groundbreaking. And what was achieved by that first cohort is the barometer by which all subsequent generations should be measured.

The intention here is not to offer a complete rejection of Flores' account of third-generation digital literature: certainly, his thinking has served as a timely provocation for those researching this domain, and there is something undeniably contemporary about the various ways in which social media platforms are being used by writers. If writing on Twitter is not representative of our present culture, then what is? But from the perspective of literary history, in terms of critical periodisation, it is hard to see how many, if any, of the genres the Flores references have advanced digital literature as just that, *literature*. Literary games do represent a significant shift, they represent a marked progression from digital literature as it *was* to digital literature as it is *now*. So marked is that progression, it establishes a binary between literary games and all forms of first- and second-generation digital literature; the leap from early hypertext fiction to the Flash moment is quite minuscule when compared with the leap from the latter to the present. Random words on a screen are random words on a screen, regardless of whether

they are produced by Javascript or Flash. Again, the intention here is not to dismiss the achievements of the current generation's antecedents, but what is being accomplished some of today's practicing artists and developers is almost as radical, if not moreso, than all that came before them. And as such, it might be said that literary games are not only the new wave of digital literature, but they are in fact *the first* new wave.

Hayles traces the generic evolution of the form's "richly diverse" varieties, offering a comprehensive list of examples for such forms as hypertext fiction, interactive fiction, CAVE[9] installations, interactive dramas, generative texts, codeworks,[10] and Flash poetry (2008, 5–30). While Hayles does reference videogame criticism, she stops short of suggesting that the literary games are defining a new generation of digital fiction. While Hayles mentions a diverse range of forms, there are important aesthetic and contextual commonalities that persist across the referenced works. Hayles has been an important figure in the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), a US-based body which aims to promote and develop digital literature.[11] While the ELO's membership comprises many practitioners, it has considerable connections to institutional academia, and a sizeable portion of its cohort are professional scholars or scholar-practitioners. Consequently, the canon of digital literature, or certainly, the one that dominates literary criticism of the institutionalised kind, can often (though not always) seem a touch "ELO-centric", and certainly, Hayles' survey of the genres of electronic literature could be described—as could many other treatments—in such terms.[12] However one historicises digital literature in terms of its perceived "generations", ELO-centric works the type of which Hayles surveys, and many other critics,[13] can sometimes be disconnected from contemporary trends and possibilities. There are two dominant reasons for this: community, and the academic mindset.

The ELO community has supported some of the great works of digital literature and scholarship. Without the ELO, its key figures and membership, a great many resources would never have been created, a significant part of our cultural and literary histories would have been lost, and an inconceivable amount of those serendipitous meetings which provide the intellectual exchange necessary for good scholarship and artistic collaborations would never have happened. But artistic communities can be dangerous, because people and personalities often overshadow whatever it is that community is meant to serve. It is human nature to support one's tribe, to make individuals who have long been a part of a group feel valued. But in artistic contexts, this can mean that the artist rather than the art becomes the main consideration, and canons get formed around bodies of work which do not always merit the attention they receive. As with any community of praxis, whenever something stale is published or exhibited, one need only look to the name of the author for an explanation. Many artists and writers suffer from a common fault: they cannot accept that they are no longer contemporary.

Struggling for resources, the decision was taken early in the ELO's existence to base the organisation at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and it has since enjoyed support from several institutional homes, respectively, the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Washington State University Vancouver (WSU Vancouver). Such associations with academic institutions and scholars have proven hugely beneficial to the ELO, allowing access to the expertise, funding, and infrastructures necessary to legitimise and develop digital literary practices and pedagogies. It has also meant that many scholar-practitioners have gravitated towards the ELO, which has had positive but also some negative consequences. Scholar-practitioners, operating across both critical and creative networks, require incredible awareness if they are to avoid contributing to partisan canons. Furthermore, there is a marked difference between an artist who produces to earn their living and one who has the privilege to do so solely in return for professional capital. As such, they are not as concerned about contemporary trends or popular expectations, but rather, about metrification, about endlessly producing to satisfy the hyper-demand for output in the academic market. And scholar-practitioners in this domain are often just predisposed to producing digital literature for exploratory reasons, and such work can seem disconnected from

the contemporary: they experiment with older forms so as to develop historical perspective, or they use limited but intuitive tools so they can bring them into the classroom.

Digital literature has moved into an era where there is an explicit tension between literature as technical experimentation and literature as immersive, interactive digital storytelling. Many of the works listed by Hayles show the hallmarks of the former. The new wave is not, as it might be said of the Flash moment, about hacking tools and platforms for literary purposes, it is not about simply making words and images move or remediating old forms to new screen; the new wave is about using the latest computer and media technologies to create digital spaces that readers can get into and actively engage with beyond clicking this link or that. Taking one of the field's earliest popular theories, Aarseth's notion of digital literature as being 'ergodic', requiring 'non-trivial effort' on the part of the reader (1997, 1), one wonders if it is only now, with the emergence of literary games, that we are seeing the first generation of truly ergodic literature. This is not merely a case of our sense of what constitutes 'trivial' moving which each new generation: the first hypertext fictions (and of course, I am generalising) were inherently text-based, sometimes little more than the electronic versions of a narrative form that already existed in Choose Your Own Adventure books, while many Flash works (again, generalising) just took words and made them move or set them atop some static image in the fashion of a comic or graphic novel. Literary games, on the other hand, have far less connections to that thing we call literature, but still, retain something of their literariness (see Ensslin 2014, 37-54).

This may all seem dismissive of digital literature's canon, particularly, the canon as it existed during epochs past, but if the practice and its criticism are ever to progress, a sense of the contemporary, of what excellence for digital literature looks like in the twenty-first century, must be established. Part of that process is reinterrogating, re-historicising, and ultimately moving beyond canons delimited by 'social and artistic connections' (Walker Rettberg 2012). Critical constructions of the now can only be determined in comparison with that which came before, with attending to a form's antecedents, influence between authors, how certain genres cross generations (Flores 2021, 31). But criticism fails if it does not possess a willingness to express what does and does not belong to a contemporary moment, and critics of digital literature must recognise that this field will benefit from enduring sustained arguments in typology, just as wider literary theory did in the fifties. A significant challenge to this process is the urgency with which scholars of digital literature are looking to build a more robust digital literary history before much of the canon is lost to technological obsolescence.[14] It is easy to appreciate why a community of scholars and practitioners might privilege historical periods and practices over theorising the contemporary when the past is in jeopardy. Nonetheless, digital literature criticism must also find a way to engage more with its present moment.

Literary typologies also matter beyond narrow, scholarly contexts, in that the typical consumer will approach a piece of literature holding pre conceived notions based on its form. Sweeping statements like 'I don't like poetry' become commonplace when a form is allowed to drift from its potential readership. If digital literature is represented in terms of past forms and aesthetics, it will never properly enter the public consciousness. And the deep irony in such a reality is that digital literature is already enjoying something of a popular moment.[15] Many popular videogames—*Dear Esther* (2012), *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2015), *Life is Strange* (2015), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017), *The Almost Gone* (2020)—are digital literature, and yet the very idea of digital literature and the communities and scholarship that surround it seem glaringly absent from the wider cultural conversation. Discussions of the 'videogames are now art' and 'the new era of narrative videogames' sort are as tired as 'literature can now be digital'; the tensions and false dissonance between these forms need to be resolved in public discourse, and that cannot happen until critical treatments of digital literature evolve to meet the popular.

Remember your game and your novel, the fundamental logics that players and readers associate with each: the former 'a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome' (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 80), the latter 'printed sheets ordered into a codex of successive gatherings … and bound along one edge' (Stein 2020, 6). All genres possess variations of forms, but the development of media typologies is best done without emphasising exceptions to the general rules: for the best of the history of both the game and the novel, these statements apply to the bulk of the work that might fall into either category. Videogames have always been about players completing objectives constrained by a specific set of rules, and novels have, for some centuries now, been the dominant form of literature, prose works of narrative fiction bound by a spine.

Now imagine a game that is not quite a game, and a novel that is not a book, and not even entirely dependent on text. That is what literary games are, the intentional aesthetic collision of the ludic (play as it is configured in the context of videogames) with the literary (in this case, textual storytelling).[16] Digital literature, like most literatures, resists elegant codification, with most genres of typological relevance possessing 'degrees of hybridity and proportions of literary and ludic elements' (Ensslin 2014, 43). It could be argued that many of those genres and titles surveyed by Hayles exhibit the ludo-literary, and certainly, when Flores speaks of cross-generational forms, there are significant parallels between present-day digital literature and the interactive fiction—think *Adventure* (1976) or *Zork* (1977)—of the seventies and eighties.[17] Interactive fiction is a genre wherein readers/players traverse entirely text-based story worlds by entering actions (for example, in *Zork*, typing "look" will return a description of the protagonist's current location), and was ideally-suited to writing digital literature for computer systems pre-graphics.[18] Not only has the genre of interactive fiction influenced current literary games—the difference being that storyworlds can now be rendered visually rather than solely through descriptive text—but it has survived to a degree in the throwback mechanics and aesthetics of popular mobile games like *A Dark Room* (2013).[19] Indeed, literary games—as they are meant here—may well just be the next iteration of interactive fiction, and perhaps interactive fiction have always been literary games. But typological muddling of that sort will only serve to detain this argument, and however close the genres may be in terms of their genealogy, the aesthetic difference between contemporary literary games and their interactive fiction antecedents is quite pronounced. And it is in genres like the walking simulator where such difference is most apparent.

When 'walking simulator' was first used to describe a new genre of game, the term was largely pejorative, coined by a gamer culture that can be ferociously resistant to any departure from the 'militaristic conventions' that have for so long been the hallmark of videogame design (Clark 2017). The objective in most popular games is to beat some opponent, to kill or be killed. And even when a game is not explicitly oppositional, there is still some challenge the player must overcome, some puzzle or environmental obstacle. Walking simulators present no such 'barrier to experiencing the narrative', rather, 'all you do is walk' (Clark 2017). The genre has drawn so much ire from gamer culture's more misogynistic factions because it represents all that they loathe about the recent narrative turn in videogame design:

> Few people used the term 'walking sim' until it came into widespread use in 2014 as a reactionary pejorative for a certain kind of exploration-drive, character-focused game. Designer Johnnemann Nordhagen never heard the term until GamerGate supporters began using it to describe the game he'd worked on, Gone Home, which was emblematic of what GamerGaters hated most: slow, small, thoughtful, centered on a queer woman's story. (Ballou 2019)

But as the misogyny of GamerGate[20] has been quelled, or at least relegated to those echo chambers and forums of the web where hate tends to congregate, the term has jettisoned such deprecating shades. Major videogame marketplaces like Steam now use the genre in its taxonomy, and several titles described as walking simulators have received popular critical acclaim. Furthermore, an increasing number of critics are deploying the term in the generic rather than pejorative sense, a consequence of many scholars having worked to actively reclaim its meaning from those who first coined it out of animosity (Bozdog and Galloway 2016; Kagen 2017; Colthup 2021).

If one engages with even a small selection of walking simulators the characteristics of the genre become readily apparent: walking simulators are all about exploration, about immersing[21] oneself in some virtual game world where there are no enemies to vanquish, no puzzles acting as barriers, no way for players to "die" or be penalised in the fashion of most other games. As defined by Kagen: "Gameplay is largely spent wandering around a surreal landscape, exploring and collecting items, and having an aesthetic experience without achieving goals or racking up points" (2017, 277). As already noted, exemplars include *Dear Esther* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*.

Set on a Hebridean island, players in *Dear Esther*[22] begin their walk at the foot of a pier in first-person perspective. Behind, empty sea defines the mathematical limits of the game's playable space, while ahead lies the path the player must walk to begin their journey across the island. *Dear Esther* opens without instructions or guidance; the mechanics need little explanation, one can either walk or look around. The only "hint" of one's direction is provided by the faint blink of a distant beacon, set atop a hill at the far end of the landscape. This opening scene is accompanied by a vignette of text that is displayed on the screen and also read as a voice-acted monologue. This is the first of many fragments of text-—which can change at random between playthroughs—that will be revealed as the player traverses the island. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* begins in a similar vein; though this time the player, again in first-person, begins at the intersection between a gate to an observatory, a security hut, and a road that winds down into the valley below. Again, the scene is set with brief textual fragments, both displayed on screen and narrated by voice.

These works by The Chinese Room are the epitome of the walking simulator, and moreover, the literary game as contemporary digital literature. Walking simulators are videogames, offering rich, immersive worlds that could not be experienced with present-day computer technologies; but walking simulators are also literary, driven by stories, and privilege *text*. Many videogames have stories, but there is a difference between a game with a story, and one which is literary in the sense that we have always known the literary. Think of a game, then think of a novel: combine these two things and what you have is a literary game, not just any game, and not just any text-based story. There is something about the experiential, text-heavy environments of the walk simulator that makes their narrative experiences "closer to that of reading" (Colthup 2019, 55) than other videogame genres. And there is something in their technē which makes them closer to the contemporary than other genres of digital fiction. It is that technical superiority—technicity that nonetheless retains the literary—which makes the embodiment of new wave aesthetics and practices.

The Gallix argument that contemporary works of digital fiction are closer to some kind of intermedia art than they are literature breaks down in the context of walking simulators. At a surface level, the influence of the novel as book is evident, both in the genre's heavy reliance on text as a medium through which much of the story is consumed, but also in the linear fashion of that consumption. While the immersive spaces these stories inhabit suggest narrative freedom and reader/player agency, this freedom is an illusion (O'Sullivan 2019a), and just as the print novel has long been "bound along one edge", so too have games been constrained by the limits of their underlying code. And while such can be said of most video games, it is particularly so with walking simulators like *Dear Esther* and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*: despite appearances,

you cannot explore the island or the valley beyond those narrow paths and roads carved out by the authors who wish for relatively linear paths to be followed within seemingly vast and open digital spaces. There are also less trivial comparisons between walking simulators and literary traditions to be made: Carbo-Mascarell argues that the genre continues the Romantic trope of walking as an aesthetic practice (2016), which Bozdog and Galloway argue is a dramaturgical practice that "engages the walker/player in critical acts of reading" (2020). By bringing the ludic closer to the literary, walking simulators become less game-like, encouraging not only "players" but also "readers", making them "an ideal medium for experimentation with literary and interactive forms" (Bozdog and Galloway 2018). Walking simulators have, in essence, rejuvenated digital literature, providing the "groundbreaking" advances that Gallix argues are absent from earlier forms of digital writing, while remaining something that is much as read as played. And that is precisely what anything hoping to belong to the new wave should be: literary fiction which brings text-based storytelling to rich, vibrant gamespaces, merging the expressive power of language with the immersion of present-day computer graphics.

Beyond Kino

There is a group of practitioners within digital literature that might be described as belonging to a Kino movement. Kino is a film-making movement which started in Canada in 1999 to advocate for the fast creation of collaboratively made, low-budget productions: "the filmmakers adopted the motto 'Faites bien avec rien, faites mieux avec peu, et faites-le maintenant!' (Do well with nothing, do better with a little, and do it right now!)" (Conway 2008, 63). Much of digital literature's early incarnations, and indeed, some of what is being done now—for example, Twitter bots[23] and Twine games—align with such a mantra. Much as many filmmakers are prohibited from big screen production because of economic factors, most would-be authors of digital literature are unable to replicate a literary game at the scale of *Dear Esther* or *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*. Many literary games emerge out of Kino-esque collaborations and have kept alive, to a degree, digital literature's long tradition of perverse engineering; *Dear Esther*, for example, was originally a *Half-Life 2* mod circulated on the popular videogame modding site, ModDB.[24] This is further evidence of the influence of past generations of digital literature on current genres like the walking simulator, but it also shows that the Kino approach to screen-based production can lead to greater, commercial opportunities: *Dear Esther* began as a collaborative, done 'with a little' endeavour that led to an AHRC grant for further development, and then, led to the foundation and rise of The Chinese Room, a respected and profitable development studio that is now a subsidiary of Sumo Digital.

Digital literature's Kino movement is alive and well, with many of its practitioners doing what they can with whoever they can, recycling and adapting whatever tools and limited resources they might have at their disposal to the task of creating digital literature. It is, as it is with Kino, a question of ecology versus economy (Conway 2008, 69), the use of postmodern aesthetics and sentiments to explore and disrupt, to experiment and make literature, digital literature, in any way possible. But the production of digital literature as purely experimental praxis, the idea that digital literature can have an entirely ontological existence operating as the optic through which media, writing, and the literary in the twentieth and twenty-first century are problematised, is simply insufficient after several decades of the same old forms and arguments. As is the nature of any contemporary moment, it is time for something more.

If digital literature is to survive late capitalism, it needs to operate as something other than scholastic experimentation, both aesthetically *and* commercially. Digital literature should not be sacrificed in the name of low-budget intellectual investigation based on found-technologies or the feigned politics of disruption (making a Twitter bot is not that disruptive). The form—as it can exist in the present moment—must continue to be popularised or it will be further relegated to academic tomes and poorly attended lectures, where small groups engage with interesting

ideas that will never have any major impact on a wider readership and general audience hungry for immersive, digital storytelling. It has already been established that digital literature is not "paper-under-glass", but it must also be more than just writing-on-glass. Critics and practitioners of digital literature must allow the form to start eating itself, to rejuvenate, and in the wake of such rejuvenation, its aesthetic evolution can be charted, and its contemporary moments identified, analysed, and celebrated when they emerge. The walking simulator is one such moment, possibly digital literature's first new moment since those early experiments with hypertext and interactive fiction in the seventies, eighties, and nineties. The walking simulator, and the broader category of literary games to which the genre belongs, is the new wave of digital fiction, because everything else is just too close to that which came before.

Notes

[1] As Suits put it a good five decades ago: "to play a game is to engage in activity directed toward bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by specific rules, where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules, and where the sole reason for accepting such limitation is to make possible such activity" (Suits 1967, 156).

[2] For comprehensive archaeologies and descriptions of digital literary forms see Funkhouser's *Prehistoric Digital Poetry* (2007) and its "follow-up", *New Directions in Digital Poetry* (Funkhouser 2012), *Electronic Literature* by Rettberg (2019), or the "Forms" section of *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities* (Grigar and O'Sullivan 2021).

[3] Readers interested in the cultural and literary history of Flash should seek out relevant publications by Salter and Murray (2014; 2021).

[4] Generally credited as the software responsible for what is now known as the "Eastgate School", Storyspace is a hypertext authoring system that was used by figures like Michael Joyce and Shelley Jackson to produce titles like *afternoon, a story* (1990) and *Patchwork Girl* (1995), considered among the first commercially available works of hypertext fiction. Storyspace is owned and maintained by Eastgate Systems, a publishing company run by Mark Bernstein based in Watertown, Massachusetts.

[5] See Alice Bell's contribution to this volume.

[6] Here, Gallix is quoting digital artist Mark Amerika.

[7] As detailed by Ensslin in *Pre-web Digital Publishing and the Lore of Electronic Literature* (2022).

[8] Giovanna di Rosario's *Electronic Poetry: Understanding Poetry in the Digital Environment* is a good treatment of this topic in the context of digital literature (2011).

[9] A recursive acronym, CAVE stands for Cave Automatic Virtual Environment, and is typically used to describe installations wherein the artwork is projected onto all or most surfaces of a room or confined space. The concept was first popularised in the early nineties by researchers at the Electronic Visualisation Lab in Chicago (Cruz-Neira et al. 1992).

[10] Volume One of the *Electronic Literature Collection* offers the following description of codework: "Codework is a type of creative writing which in some way references or incorporates formal computer languages (C++, Perl, etc.) within the text. The text itself is not necessarily code that will compile or run, though some have added that requirement as a form of constraint" (Hayles et al. 2006).

[11] The Electronic Literature Organization's website is eliterature.org, or for a short history of the ELO community, see Rettberg (2009) and Heckman (2021).

[12] Far more comprehensive treatments of this subject can be found in Ensslin (2007, 2020) and Rettberg (2014).

[13] Here, I include myself.

[14] On this subject, see the short "A Case for Electronic Literary History" section of "The Origins of Electronic Literature as Net/Web Art" (O'Sullivan and Grigar 2019, 431–32).

[15] I have previously written about this topic for the *LA Review of Books* (O'Sullivan 2017b), discussing digital literature's rising popularity and contemporary moment in the context of *All the Delicate Duplicates* (2017) by Mez Breeze and Andy Campbell.

[16] A comprehensive unpacking of "ludic", "play", and "literary", as well as other relevant terms, can be found in the introductory chapter of Ensslin's *Literary Gaming* (2014, 1–15).

[17] *Adventure*, also known at various junctures as *ADVENT* and *Colossal Cave Adventure*, was created by Will Crowther in the mid-seventies, while *Zork* was developed by Tim Anderson, Marc Blank, Bruce Daniels, and Dave Lebling, part of MIT's Dynamic Modelling Group, a few years later. Both games are considered among the first works of interactive fiction and have attained something of a cult status among gamers and games critics.

[18] Montfort's book *Twisty Little Passages* offers a comprehensive account of the genre (2003).

[19] Thomsen has penned a short but compelling discussion of *A Dark Room* in *The New Yorker (2014)*.

[20] Readers unfamiliar with "GamerGate" should consider Jane's *Misogyny Online: A Short (and Brutish) History* (2016), or for something more succinct, Dewey's aptly-titled "The only guide to Gamergate you will ever need to read" in *The Washington Post* (2014).

[21] Much has been written—and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives—on "immersion", but in this context, it is meant in the participatory sense of the term as described by Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997, 97–125). Murray describes immersion as an experience that you are actively *in*, like learning to swim as one becomes submerged in water.

[22] I have written more comprehensively about *Dear Esther* elsewhere (O'Sullivan 2017a; 2019b, 87-91;122-126).

[23] See work by Skains, Wright and Sheehan in this volume.

[24] Modding, which is short for "modification", is the process by which the fundamental elements of a commercial game are used by (usually amateur) enthusiasts to create some other game, without the need for developing the entire production from scratch. For more on modding as it relates to game culture, see the work of Alexander Unger (2012).

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