

The Gaping Garments of Electronic Literature

In contemporary society, literary texts have evolved off the page and into the world around us. The expansiveness of electronic literature and new media has led to a variety of mutations into other mediums. Previous forms, such as hypertext fiction, have remained on screen and been interactive on what theorist Espen Aarseth has called a “purely idealogical” level (51). The psychological spaces we live in are now being freed from the boundaries of everything we know as writers and readers. One of the primary genres that is urging this on is what new media scholar Jill Walker-Rettberg has termed, “Distributed Narratives.” Distributed narratives, like the sticker novel *Implementation*, or Shelley Jackson's short story *Skin*, tattooed onto volunteers one word at a time, or any number of geolocation or transmedia based stories, have bled into the the world around us, making society an expansive narrative world. Literature has left the computer screen to have bits and pieces of stories immerse themselves in the spaces which humans occupy. Literature becomes richer when it moves off the page, bleeding into different parts of our lives like the gaping garments Roland Barthes discusses in *The Pleasure of The Text*. These gaping garments, stickers with one section of a large story, a single word on a body part, reconstruct the world we live in, and help us re-imagine our relationship to literature.

At the time Aarseth was writing *Cybertext*, his view that hypertext fiction and other forms of electronic literature were interactive on only a “purely idealogical” level was sound

(51). Early, preweb, hypertext fiction like Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, or Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*, were CD-Rom based and a reader could only interface with the lexias and links implemented on the disc Eastgate sent them. Clicking around a CD-Rom is surely not a very interactive experience. You are reminded, as Aarseth points out, of “inaccessible strategies” unavailable to readers at any given time (3). These factors have often, as others like Aarseth, and myself, have observed, are what keeps detractors of electronic literature away from immersing themselves in the experience.

A paper based novel is truly interactive. You can flip it anywhere at anytime. Readers cannot do that with *Patchwork Girl*. At this point, detractors had a definite advantage. Also, the theoretical approach, trying to connect, the work of Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes, that George Landow and other theorists have tried to apply was interesting, but did not totally work.

As literature has evolved off of the page and into the screen, in the past few years it has moved even further away from print and into the world around us. The psychical spaces we live in are now being freed from these boundaries, bringing into question what we know as writers and readers. Story telling is being done over a number of ever expanding mediums into our lives now.

Perhaps the only way to accommodate Aarseth's concerns is to move off of the computer and into the world around us. Another of Aarseth's objections comes from the fact that readers can only follow “already scripted” links in the text (31). Interactivity is a “purely ideological

term” which lacks sufficient empirical evidence for his standards (51). The most recent evolutions of the writerly text have moved past the relations to critical theory which Landow and others made and have, more often than not, left behind disc-based exploratory hypertext, and even the world wide web, to move into the psychical spaces surrounding us. These works, what Walker-Rettberg refers to as “distributed narratives,” leave behind not only the bounded text, but computer screens to have pieces and bits of stories immerse themselves in psychical spaces which humans occupy. Much like hypertext fiction, distributed narratives usually cannot be experienced in one sitting or place. The limitations which Aarseth complains about are further complicated when the text moves off not only the page, but also the computer screen into the world around us. The key, as Walker-Rettberg argues in *Distributed Narratives: Telling Stories Across Networks*, to the next evolution of the writerly text is their connectivity:

Trying to see how narratives can be split open and spread like this is important, because narratives are one of our main ways of understanding ourselves and of understanding our world. When the world changes, our ways of understanding it must change too, and as distributed narrative become increasingly common, we need to try to understand this new and sometimes invisible way of seeing and communicating who we are. (1-2)

To get free of and leave behind the previous boundaries that both bounded and electronic literature have is to escape the boundaries of everything we know as writers and readers. The

connections between texts or ideas, however, do not refer to “the psychological disintegration of the artifact” of a text (4). This is a much more literal distribution than the theoretical one of Foucault, Barthes, Derrida, and other theorists which Landow has hedged his work on.

The most interesting distributed narrative I have encountered is Nick Montfort and Scott Rettberg's sticker novel *Implementation*. *Implementation* is a novel printed on sheets of 2x5 labels. Readers are asked to print their own stickers and place them in the psychological environment around them, documenting them via photography which is then sent to an email address on the *Implementation* website. Fragments of the novel are distributed around the world; stickers have been documented in places from New Jersey to Russia and back. The reader of *Implementation*, according to Walker-Rettberg, are asked to “insert it into their everyday lives and spaces” by posting stickers in the world around them (9).

The most compelling aspect of participating in *Implementation* was my experience with how meaning changes when a sticker is placed on a flyer or a telephone pole. Like the trouble Walker-Rettberg had with her first reading of afternoon, the experience of first finding a sticker can be quite startling. There are no links to a website or even the title of the novel on any sticker. This allows the meaning of each sticker to become new based on its placement in the psychological world.

Participants can actively place a fragmented sticker somewhere, defying one of Aarseth's objection to hypertext: the lack of non-scripted linking. By asking participants to insert stickers

into their daily lives, the authors of Implementation give up authorial agency and acquiesce the ability for “new contexts giving new meanings” to occur without them (9). As Walker-Rettberg notes, readers of a single sticker might not even realize it is a piece of a larger literary puzzle. Much as a few clicks in a hypertext novel can give readers the closure needed to understand the structure of it, while many stickers are purposefully self-contained, others give a strong sense that they are connected to a larger piece of literature. Linking becomes “implicit,” not required for an appreciation of the current sticker, but reaching out towards the larger work in question (10). To paraphrase Barthes in *The Death of the Author*, the authors die the moment writing, the placement of a sticker in the psychical world, happens.

While a reader could use a search engine to try to figure out if the sticker they found in their psychical world is part of something larger, it may be a little harder to do so with Jackson's *Skin*. *Skin* is a short story that is tattooed, one word per reader, on the skin of its readers. As words die, the story will change until there is only one word, and then none, left. Living flesh becomes links in *Skin*. As Jackson notes in an interview Rettberg did with her in 2006 for the *Iowa Web Review*, a bunch of scars, “a monstrously aggregate body,” have evolved into a literal set of bodies where the text lives and will eventually die (CITATION).

Called “a mortal work of art,” it is short story that is being tattooed, one word at a time, on volunteers' bodies. By the time the project is complete, over 2,000 people will have participated in it, and only those who have a word tattooed on them, which Jackson herself

assigns, will ever see a copy of the complete short story.

The project was inspired by a book tour where she scratched words on rocks and fence posts, planning to leave directions to the words online. Realizing that tattooing was already a form of “publishing” on the skin, Jackson connected the idea to her earlier concept, and soon thereafter she put out a call for volunteers in the summer of 2003. Since then over 10,000 volunteers have sent emails asking to participate. “Skin” is a truly mortal work: as participants die over the years, the story will gradually change, with no complete version ever appearing. According to Jackson, some volunteers have even come forward to ask if they could will their word to their children after they die.

It is interesting to note Jackson’s progression from focusing on objects like scars and bras that act on the body, in earlier works like *Patchwork Girl* and *The Doll Games*, to actually making fiction that, as a tattoo, acts on the body. This progression makes sense given that literature can, and should, not only leave the bounded text and find a home on the electronic screen but also become immersed in the world around us.

In fact, there has been recent developments about *Skin*. According to *Jacket Copy*, the Los Angeles Times' book blog:

Recently Jackson e-mailed them to ask that they record a video of their word tattoo, and to say the word. From those words recorded by participants, she's edited and assembled a new story. To be clear, Jackson doesn't call them

participants -- with great affection and admiration, she calls the tattoo volunteers "words."

Geolocation

Another example of storytelling over a number of mediums is what is known as Transmedia. Leading transmedia scholar Henry Jenkins defines transmedia as “storytelling across multiple forms of media with each element making distinctive contributions to a fan's understanding of the story world.” The use of various media forms, transmedia involves both stories and games, gives consumers a variety of means for entering into a story world, which has a goal of decentralizing authorship and play, putting choice and ownership in the hands of consumers.

Some examples=Lost, Series 8 of Buffy The Vampire Slayer instead of moving from left to right...edges as “spaces for transactions” (Ruppel MLA 09)...more examples=**Direct-URLs, books, phone numbers, business cards (the series Heroes was the example for some of these)**...Jenkins transmedia storytelling definition...Transmedia fiction definition: stories and games...

Literature, and I strongly believe each of these examples I have given is a literary act,

becomes richer when it inhabits the worlds around us. These acts bleed into the world around us, like a gaping garment. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes speaks of the gaping garments:

Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes...it is intermittence...which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance. (10)

A novel written on stickers, a short story tattooed onto people, or the ever expanding media world of a media property, like a gaping garment, intermittently live in both the original content medium that they were created for, a sticker, a tattoo, etc and in the world we live in whether a sticker placed on a wall or a tattoo on someone's leg.

All of this sounds very interesting, but how does it actually work in the real world?

While, by the time I offered my body for it there was a significant backlog already, I do not have a *Skin* tattoo, I can offer my own experiences with the *Implementation* sticker project. I began participating in *Implementation* during the summer of 2004 after completing my senior thesis with Rettberg the previous spring. During the summer, I spent time placing stickers all around campus. I did this in a number of different ways. Sometimes I tried to leave a "trail" of some sort of theme from the novel. Often, I would leave two somehow connected stickers on a telephone pole or flyer.

Mostly, however, I left them as single flyers on their own. There is no web link or mention that the sticker is part of a larger project on any sticker (I asked Nick about that...elaborate...). Something Montfort and Rettberg worked hard to do was to make sure that each sticker could stand on its own without any other context or knowledge of a larger project/. (it's much harder than you think...I tried it in 2008...) I reconstructed the world around me, placing stickers all around campus, creating a smaller world of unconnected *Implementation* stickers. *Implementation* is a novel on stickers, a town, a series of characters, and a narrative world.

The experience of inhabiting this narrative world was an interesting one. I found myself coming back to various stickers as the next school year went on to see if what they represented changed based on season or other varying factors. When the sticker novel came up in classes or in conversation with other students or faculty, most had only seen one sticker on its own. This led a few to check out more stickers and even add their own to campus. They reported similar experiences coming up with their own little games for placing them on campus, their own systems like I had the previous summer. Whether understanding *Implementation* was part of a larger narrative world or just a single, strange, sticker placed on a telephone pole, gives readers agency over how they interact with the text. Readers can decide whether to “implement” a plan for placing stickers or just haphazardly adding them. The choice is far out of Rettberg and Montfort’s hands.

As Jackson is working with visual media to extend her project, Rettberg and Montfort used photography. Participants in *Implementation* were asked to submit photos of their stickers and where they placed them in the world. Participants have submitted stickers all over New Jersey, America, and the world from south Jersey to Norway to Russia and back. A coffee table book is current being prepared of some of the best stickers for each entry in the novel.

Distributed narratives like *Implementation* and *Skin* take us another step away from paternal, authorial, privileged texts. While hypertext fiction, especially since the advent of the World Wide Web, has proven to not have a high profit margin, distributed narratives are an even further step away from authorial, capitalistic, texts. Janet Murray, in her seminal book *Hamlet On The Holodeck*, notes the objections of the art theorist Suzanne Langer to this sort of “forth wall” interaction between artists and their audience which defies established norms of distance conveniently held (101). In hypertext fiction, the reader can actively engage with a text, but when they participate in a distributed narrative they are engaging in a way that breaks even more rules. One thing is certain: this discourse is still evolving and in progress.

The limitations of humanity will never truly allows a text to be completely free in bounded, sticker, or hyperlinked form. As Foucault smartly argues in the penultimate paragraph of his essay *What Is An Author?* This would be “pure romanticism” to be completely free of those constraints (222). This is humanity's design flaw, not the texts.

~~Another design flaw is traditionalists' standard talking point that the disruptive, feral,~~

tendencies of hypertext leaves only the most superficial or academic readings available to readers. This was echoed even by Susan Sontag, who, after laying out a similar argument to the one presented here, goes on to say:

————— I think most readers surely, virtually all readers will be surprised to learn that —————
 ————— structured storytelling from the most basic beginning-middle-end scheme of —————
 ————— traditional tales to more elaborately constructed, nonchronological and —————
 ————— multivoiced narratives is actually a form of oppression rather than a source of —————
 ————— delight. (220)

Sontag goes on to argue readers do not “expect to write other people’s novels for them” and the single authorial voice is a way in which we “make sense of our lives.” (221) While the move away from a centralized, author based, text is a threat to that comfort level, it is an even bigger threat to capitalistic concerns, which desire disposable, throwaway, literature and thought. A book reread, “an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society,” a hypertext further explored, another sticker placed on a wall, is one less book sold (15).

Distributed narratives, and electronic literature in general, by its very nature, are defiant toward capitalist ideology. Rettberg writes in *Experiments in Irrational Literature: The Present & Future of Electronic Literature or How I Became E-Literate* that “no rational person would or could work on projects of innovative experimental literature...with a profit motive in mind” when the method of distribution is free on the internet ().

The decentralization of literature is perhaps the most exciting, and dangerous, aspect of distributed narratives. A central author has always been used as a signifier to unite the work. Removing the author, making participants co-creators in how the work is not only presented, but also displayed, distributed, and modified, gives agency to those participants. Control is being wrestled out of the hands of content creators, allowing the process of writing to be more democratic, more real, and more immersive.