Connecting with </Text>

How the electronic platform shifts the interactions of authors, readers, and texts

by

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In loving memory of Emily Morris and Ron Girdham
who taught by example the necessity of balancing work and play in artistic pursuits.

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<u>Abstract</u>

Electronic literature, as opposed to printed, exists on a distinct platform in which data changes format, so that there is a separation between information and its representation—a small detail that parallels a larger issue in determining what is real and true, and what is not. This problem has affected both culture and scholarship: are blogs and online articles as legitimate as printed works? What sources, people, and pictures can be trusted? This creates, I argue, a shift in the way we understand literature. Electronic literature, I argue, promotes a way of thinking about literature not as representations of truth, but as a place to explore possibilities.

It is important to understand that literature online is simply work that has been digitized, while electronic literature was *designed* for the medium of the Internet, so that it is written not only with words but also image, video, and hyperlinks. The electronic platform, because it exists as interactive and connective space, alters previous theories about what it means to produce a work of literature, or art, and what it means to understand it. Electronic literature creates, I argue, different relationships between authors, readers, and texts that are distinct to this form, using two works, *de Salinas al Mundo* and *Street Space,* as case studies. These works were created by students, not experts, and for the general population, not scholars. They illustrate broadly how people interact with literature and understand its capabilities.

By looking at previous notions of authorship, readership, and the mediating text between, we can see how form and function affect one another, and begin to understand how the electronic platform is affecting the function and understanding of literature. I use standard literary theory to show how these works of electronic literature complicate our traditional understanding of literature and point to how these theories might be applied, revised, or extended for the digital age.

The first chapter addresses authorship, and how collaboration of ideas and sources has evolved toward and within the digital age. In order to understand the role of the author, it is necessary to understand how authors interact with a text, in terms of narrative, plot, and the tools available. I will argue that the author is the creator, not necessarily of *meaning*, as Foucault and Barthes argue, but of *work.* The author produces a text.

The second chapter is a study of readership. In understanding the reader, we must understand how readers interact with a text. Necessarily, this is dependent on the medium of the work and, as *de Salinas* and *Street Space* show, the electronic platform provides a way of interacting with a text than paper cannot. The reader, I argue, takes on a more active, exploratory role in reading digital texts than print ones. The change in medium changes the ways readers and authors engage with a text, as well as the way creativity is expressed and understood.

The final chapter aims to explore the construction of an electronic text. In addition to theory, I will use the blog of theorist Stanley Fish and quantitative research I did for *Fiction Writers Review*, an online literary journal. Both are useful for the way they engage with the other: the blog with scholarship and critical conversations, the online journal and virtual community with printed works and physical communities. I will illustrate in this chapter how texts interact with other texts, as well as authors and readers, and connect my overarching argument that electronic literature, because of its combination of traditional and contemporary elements, allows for a distinct (though not wholly foreign) way of reading, writing, and understanding text.

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Introduction

Imagining what it is like to be someone else is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.
—Ian McEwan, as quoted on *Fiction Writers Review*

Multimodal texts, which make rich use of images, audio, video, and other forms of computer-processed data, enable authors to interact in new ways with their objects of study, and to create rich models of complex processes and ideas.
—Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence*

Ian McEwan describes a powerful attraction to literature, shared by authors and readers alike, which lies in the individual's imagination. In electronic literature, as Fitzpatrick describes, imagination is constructed with new tools and media, combining both visual and verbal language to create new types of interactions between authors and readers. The electronic platform comes with distinctive advantages and complications, as any artistic or scientific advancement does; however, because this particular advancement is intricately connected to both individuals and society, it has a profound effect on people and the ways we connect. While advancement in chemical research might eventually lead to a medicine that will then affect people, advancements in digital technology and modes of communication immediately and significantly affect people—though perhaps in less obvious ways.

The electronic platform, as opposed to printed pages, is composed of data that constantly changes format, so that there is separation between information and its representation. What we see is not fixed in relation to its data, and the representations are not necessarily true to their original form, resulting in a divide between subjective and objective notions of reality and truth. In America, we can scarcely avoid hearing about reality television shows, the private lives of celebrities, and Photoshopped magazine covers. I do not intend to define what is real and true, but to draw attention to the phenomenon that an audience must (or ought to) think twice before

believing what they read or see. In social spheres, too, users must be critical and discerning in their engagement with information presented. As a medium unlike any other, the electronic platform complicates ideas of representation, communication, and artistic expression, as well as interactions with these changing notions.

This famous cartoon by Peter Steinberg (see fig. 1) published in the July 5, 1993 edition of *The New Yorker*, addresses concerns surrounding the ability of a computer user to create a separate, virtual identity—one that cannot be taken at face value. Steinberg's cartoon pokes fun at the seemingly impenetrable screen that can disguise a dog as human, and is frequently referenced in both scholarly and popular conversations. How to read identity online is still a cultural and academic concern, highlighted in books and papers, as well as films, news stories, and community forums: what can you believe, and who is a dog?

"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Fig. 1. The New Yorker Cartoon, July 5, 1993 (Steiner).

This communicative medium opens many questions and possibilities, and while we have learned a great deal since 1993, substantial questions remain. At the 2011 Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory (HASTAC) conference, Siva Vaidhyanathan, author of *The Googlization of Everything (And why we should worry),* spoke of the democratizing power the Internet holds, for its inclusion of people who were not previously engaged in critical discussions, and the danger, for its domination by a single, private company

(Vaidhyanathan). Cathy Davidson began her lecture by asking, "does the terms, the theory, the relationships imbedded in that word 'digital' actually transform the humanities and transform scholarly communication?" and heralds the transformative power of "digital" works, her own project focusing on "taking hold of this particular historical moment, the particular technologies of this moment, and using them for transformational institutional change" (Davidson). Both speakers prove that there is demonstrable need to seriously consider (and reconsider) what the Internet does, and whom it serves. The conference itself is evidence that the changing function and form of virtual space warrants continued research and discussion.

As a child of the first generation to grow up with the Internet, in two deeply segregated towns, and now as a student in the digital age, I am interested in the way the present cultural and historical moment has transformed, and continues to transform, both scholarly communication and broader understandings of authors, readers, and texts—including the thoughts and voices of those who previously were ignored or simply not heard. The transformation of cultural and social interactions result in a distinct type of literature—a literature, I argue, that substantively shifts the roles of authors, readers, and texts.

The Internet was originally designed as "an electronic forum" for academics and researchers to share ideas more easily (Anandarajan, 4). In the early 1990s, the development of creation of hypertext markup language (HTML) along with "the design of server and browser software to view the interconnected documents that would collectively become the World Wide Web, or the Web" made this forum more efficient, and eventually, more accessible (Anandarajan, 4). Through browsers, like Safari, Firefox, and Chrome, anyone can now wander through interconnected documents, though these browsers require frequent updates because software programs and data formats are constantly changing. It is this evolution and

collaboration that defines both the form and function of the Internet, and also what makes its form (what *is* it?) difficult to articulate. In contrast to the way a cartoon is a visual form with verbal elements, the Internet is the *place* for form to exist; it is the underlying system of connections.

Electronic literature, defined as "works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer," creates new relationships between authors, readers, and texts that are distinct to this form (Electronic Literature Organization, screen 1). The electronic platform makes it possible to construct different visual representations of a central idea, so that rather than necessarily presenting a narrative with a single direction (according to the language system) and order (beginning to end), the reader of electronic works can click here and click there. This platform, because it exists as an interactive and connective space, challenges previous theories about what it means to produce a work of literature, or art, and what it means to read and interpret it. Because authors use new and varied types of media to construct a multidimensional *place*, the reader actively explores, rather than passively follows, the story.

This type of narrative construction that uses different types of media is not purely and absolutely "new," but it is a new organization of old elements of expression and communication. This thesis is not intended to be a comprehensive investigation of the way new media operates, for as Wendy Chun remarks,

> It seems impossible to know the extent, content, and effects of new media. Who can touch the entire contents of the World Wide Web or know the real size of the Internet or of mobile networks? Who can read and examine all time-based online interactions? Who can expertly move from analyzing social networking sites to Japanese cell phone novels to

hardware algorithms to databases? Is a global picture of new media possible? (Chun, 1)

I am not interested in a global picture of new media, but how these media and digital technologies might allow, or require, distinctive types of interaction with text. By combining oral, literary, and artistic tradition, the electronic platform shifts interactions between authors, readers, and text, and forces the complexities of expression and communication to rise.

I focus on two works of electronic literature: *Street Space*, by Melissa Castillo-Garsow, and *de Salinas al Mundo,* by Li Yun Alvarado. Both women were graduate students when they designed these sites. Though educated, neither are scholars in this field, nor is their audience intentionally scholarly. Neither *Street Space* nor *de Salinas al Mundo* represents the most progressive, ambitious movement in electronic literature, but the basic ways these works incorporate image, video, audio, and text reveal, I argue, a fundamental shift in understandings of literature and the roles of authors and readers, even text itself.

The homepage of *Street Space* greets users with a rap song by Kool G Rap, "The Streets," and a stark black and white photograph of an indistinct, concrete city. A visitor might click on any given topic at the top of the site, or links within the written introduction. A reader interested in street culture might want to further explore the "new up-and-coming genre of literature,"[1] while someone more interested in theoretical matters might prefer to learn more about the construction of "space." In this way, readers can construct their own narrative and experience within the site. *De Salinas al Mundo,* by contrast, does not provide an introduction, but foregrounds an invitation for visitors to "explore our stories". Each image leads to a short poem, written by Alvarado, that contains links to characters and different components of the

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[1] A 2008 article by Hill, Perez, and Irby notes that street fiction is also called "street lit, hip-hop lit, ghetto fiction, and hip-hop fiction" (76). I will refer to this genre as street literature, because Castillo-Garsow does, but it is important that all terms refer to a single genre that is distinct for its "subject matter, hip-hop aesthetics, independent production, and authorship" (76).

world in which this story, their many stories, take place. The experience of reading this site is not a passive act, but rather an active exploration of a constructed world.

While printed works exist unchangeably as objects, *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo* evolve and grow by design. *Street Space* includes a story being "written as you read" ("Boricua City," *Street Space*) while *de Salinas al Mundo* often asks readers, in Spanish and English, for their input: "*With what do you write? ¿*Con qué escribes?" ("Lady June's Pencils," *de Salinas al Mundo)*. Although these sites do not constitute the only or even optimal ways to open a text or involve readers collaboratively, I do see them as occupying a unique position within this technical and cultural moment. *De Salinas al Mundo* and *Street Space* join verbal and visual art, scholarly and creative work, and different genres of literature. With the aid of digital media, these works blur particular boundaries of content and form and provoke questions about the boundaries between expression and reception.

Just as today's artistic, cultural, and technological trends are propelled by the work of those who came before, electronic works at once represent the culmination of past traditions, and because of their restructuring of traditional elements, a rupture of preconceived notions of literature and art. The Internet is a medium in which we encounter not only an idea, a witticism about honest identity going to the dogs, but the representation of that idea. Though few readers deliberately see a cartoon in terms of its cartoonness, they nevertheless experience its visual and verbal language as component parts of a multi-modal whole. The Internet and advances in digital technology allow for new modes of representation, and relationships to them. The combination of verbal and visual elements, as in Steiner's cartoon, are products and producers of a cultural environment which not only blurs distinctions between literature and art, but academic and

creative work, authorship and readership, and the place of texts like *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo*.

The function of electronic literature is as different from printed matter as their disparate forms suggest. To illustrate the challenges electronic literature presents, I will revisit well known formulations of authorship and texuality by three influential theorists who preceded the rise of the Internet, such as Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, and Michel Foucault, to demonstrate that their theories, along with other longstanding views of texuality must be revised or expanded in light of *de Salinas al Mundo* and *Street Space*. Because the trajectory of literary and artistic history helped constitute the practices of the digital age, looking back will help us understand our current position, and offer hints as to where future developments may lead. I also use contemporary theorists and cultural critics of new media, including Wendy Chun, Katherine Hayles, and Kathleen Fitzpatrick, and contemporary forms of literature and research, including blogs and empirical research I conducted on *Fiction Writers Review*, an online literary journal. By examining previous notions of authorship, readership, and the mediating text between, we can see how form and function affect one another, and by analyzing contemporary theory and sources, we may begin to understand how the electronic platform is affecting the function and understanding of literature.

Chapter 1: Authorship As Production

The value and understanding of authorship has evolved in as dramatic of ways as the physical medium of storytelling, which has taken spoken, and written, and now digitized form. The responsibilities of authors have shifted as well, oscillating between public and private roles with varying degrees of social obligation. Authors have always been connective by nature, tied to community and discourse—no matter its form—as well as to "numerous considerations of topic, approach, attitudes, imagery, turns of phrase, and so on which have always served scholars as foundations for attributions" (Craig, 282). Importantly, because of the author's relational, collaborative position, originality does not arise from content or method but from the interaction between the author and their work. As both form and content are progressive, building on the past, it is necessary to look back to tradition and history while anticipating future developments. This chapter will analyze the evolving interactions between authors and texts, ultimately, to identify the particular developments that are distinctive and significant to electronic literature.

Electronic literature is work that utilizes an electronic platform: "works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" (Electronic Literature Organization, screen 1). The "important literary aspects" qualification is problematically subjective, though perhaps intentionally so, and its vagueness speaks to the pervasive problem of adjudicating matters of "truth" and "reality." What is important, what counts as literary? What qualifies an author of electronic literature? For the purposes of this project, I refer to the author as the person who collects and creatively assembles these varied sources and media into a cohesive, if not always linear, structure. This chapter is organized by questions regarding the work of the author as it relates to form, how the tools

available on the electronic platform affect authorship, and specifically what this means, through looking at *Street Space,* by Melissa Castillo-Garsow, and *de Salinas al Mundo*, by Yi Lun Alvarado.

1.1: The Work of Authors

The roles of authors, like the ideals they pursue, are subject to social, cultural, and political tides. Accordingly, theories of authorship are influenced by authorial traditions and available technologies of their time, but as theoretical *principles*, they are ongoing. It will be useful to see how literary theories have evolved, and how the form and function of language have evolved together. The types of interactions authors had, and have, with language will help us understand these electronic works as interactive products.

Digital cultures, flooded with ways of experiencing language, parallel oral cultures in the perception of language as something to be experienced. Walter J. Ong argues that in oral cultures—which he describes as cultures without written words—people conceived words as events, because once spoken they are irretrievably gone, and stories, then, as sequences of related events, as experiences. The power of words, he argues, derived in great part from their form as sound, for "all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from within living organisms, is 'dynamic'" (Ong, 32). There is life force behind it. He argues that the temporal nature of sound also lends language value; unable to be exactly reproduced, it maintains a precious singularity. Ong argues for the power of the spoken word by describing the way it requires the speaker and listener to connect in a single, momentary experience of sound:

> When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally
> become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker. If the speaker asks the

audience to read a handout provided for them, as each reader enters into his or her

own private reading world, the unity of the audience is shattered, to be re-

established only when oral speech begins again. (Ong, 74)

An audience, as Ong describes it, is connected through collective listening. In oral cultures, he writes, stories were precious for their temporality and unifying as experiences. This notion, I argue, of stories as experiences returns in the form of electronic literature, which integrates elements of listening, watching, and reading, in a way that constructs a multimedia, multisensory experience.

Ong proceeds to argue that advances in technology created the possibility of lasting, imagistic representations that could be looked at in parts, broken into smaller parts, and redesigned. He argues that scribal, printing, and publishing technologies changed words from events to material objects, which then could be analyzed and restructured. Rather than an experience that disappears after its deliverance, a story that is written can be read again and transported easily. It is not so with sound, for, as Ong describes, "If I stop the movement of sound, I have nothing – only silence, no sound at all" (Ong, 32). It is movement that creates sound, and it is the transition to visually reproduced words that allows for movement of language. Ong argues that the transition of knowledge from spoken to written form allows for analytic thought, suddenly available for individual consumption (Ong, 34-36). While Ong's conclusions have been challenged and critiqued by the correctives of later scholars, I agree with his basic sentiment that the transition from the spoken to written word fundamentally changed the way we view language. By interacting with words differently, we interact with thoughts and knowledge differently. It may be overreaching to argue that categorization and analytic thought did not exist at all before the written word, but surely such thought patterns in oral cultures

looked and operated differently than they do today.

  Through a study of Creole novels, Wolfgang Raible provides evidence to suggest that there may not be as clear a distinction between oral and written language as Ong argues.[2] Raible shows the way speaking and writing may take various medial and conceptual forms, as works can be conceptually oral or conceptually scriptural, or have medial orality or medial scripturality. An oral text may be written, or transcribed, while a conceptually scriptural text, like Hamlet, might be preformed orally (Raible, 17-20). One text, then, could be both oral and scriptural and could occupy various types of media. Raible's theory holds true for electronic literature, which incorporates many combinations of conceptual and medial orality and scripturality.

  It should be clear, however, that whatever form the text takes, it is necessarily imbued with the literary and artistic traditions of its ancestors. The collusion of the technologies and trends from both oral and written traditions show that orality and literacy are not completely disparate but are, as Ruth Finnegan argues, parts of a whole (Finnegan, 139). My point is not that any one form—verbal, visual, digital—is more complete than another, but that electronic literature has distinctive qualities and limitations from oral and written structures. To understand the role of authorship, in any medium, is to understand how the author exists and interacts with the formal constraints of their tradition and the technology of their time.

  What happens, then, if one cannot see the interaction between authors and their work? German cultural critic Walter Benjamin argues in his essay "The Storyteller" (1936) that texts without interaction are not artful, but journalistic. In the 1920s, World War I veterans began to write about their experiences as soldiers. In these novels, the relationship between speaker and listener, author and reader, was broken and the communicative power of writing deadened

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[2] Raible uses *Atipa* by Alfred Parépou (1885) and *Dézafi* by Franquétienne (1975) as his primary examples along with Caribbean author, Raphaël Confiant, who wrote in Creole.

because, Benjamin argues, this type of novel "neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it,"

and the stories, he bemoans, were "anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth" (87,

84). Benjamin argues that the relationship between the reader and author ought to parallel the

listener and speaker, telling stories that go "from mouth to mouth" and so uniting the author and

reader through shared experience, the equivalent of collective listening. In both relationships,

however, there is an acting agent and a passive one: one whose voice is heard, who expresses

ideas, and one who hears, who interprets ideas. This is, or can be, a productive relationship, and

it remains so today. Electronic literature, however, introduces a new possibility by allowing

readers agency in directing the experience. Rather than submitting to an author's projected

narrative or a speaker's projected voice, the reader of electronic literature takes an active role in

hearing, seeing, or reading what they want, in a sequence they determine. There is, I argue, a

new way for readers and authors to connect through shared experience and it is an experience

constructed by the author, and navigated by the reader.

Benjamin feared that what he saw in these novels as a trend toward information dumping

would kill the intimate relationship between authors and readers as connected by a thoughtfully

constructed text. He argues that the excess of information and lack of meaningful interaction

with experience isolates novelists and their experiences. This isolation allows, or is perhaps a

function of, the novelist's refusal to confront issues of mortality. Benjamin believes that

contemporary culture pushed death out of sight and out of mind, and that "this change is

identical with the one that has diminished the communicability of experience to the same extent

as the art of storytelling has declined" (93). Benjamin believes the apparent unwillingness of an

author to confront their mortal existence and communicate their experiences is self-defeating:

why write? His theory rests on the assumption that to write is to connect through experience,

author to reader, person to person.[3] Electronic literature necessarily connects authors and readers, as it exists on a connective platform. However, they do not necessarily connect on a level of shared humanity. Benjamin's argument that literature ought to translate the author's own experience into "the experience of those who are listening to his tale" is incomplete, for electronic literature provides an experience which is likely different for each viewer, in interpretation as well as experience navigating the sites (87).

Michel Foucault shifts the focus of Benjamin's argument in "What is an Author" (1969), arguing that the author had become isolated, rather than the novel. He writes: "Our culture has metamorphosed this idea of narrative, or writing, as something designed to ward off death. Writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life: it is now a voluntary effacement which does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer's very existence" (102). While Benjamin argues that an author's willful ignorance of mortality left the novel unable to communicate the full extent of human experience, Foucault argues that the author assumes their own death, for "the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing" (102-103). An author does not have an active role, but one so passive that it is very nearly dead.[4]

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[3] Furthermore, this interaction ought to be between individuals. Ivan Kreilkamp argues that Benjamin's dismay at the decline in artful storytelling "should be understood in part as a symptom of dismay at the perceived diminution of the authority of the individual cultural producer" (8). Kreilkamp argues that Benjamin's storyteller longs for the days of a "powerful individual voice, that, we are to believe, once unified and defined a community" and opposes the notion of a collective production of art (8).

[4] Antonio Calgano argues that Foucault's identification of the death of the author points to a larger goal which "no longer is immortal life, but now the emphasis is on death and sacrifice." However, Calgano argues that two subsequent works, *The Arcaheology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Discourse,* show Foucault's belief in an "author having certain content, power and

In this way, the content of contemporary literature, which featured the death of death, reflected

its form, which was produced through the death of the author. The message and its medium

reflect upon each other, in a way that parallels the oral experience of words as events and written

language as arrangeable structures.

Electronic literature, too, inspires a re-visioning of language as a function of its medium.

Authors of the electronic platform write with many media, in various genres and voices, and it

becomes up to the reader to navigate the space between. Both Benjamin and Foucault recognize

the importance of reader interaction as it pertains to the author, though while Benjamin wishes

for more authorial voice and perspective in the text so as to connect with readers, Foucault sees a

lack of authorial voice as creating an absence, so that the reader can read the *text*, rather than the

author.

Roland Barthes, like Foucault, argued that the voice of the author, because it is socially

constructed, could not hold the secrets to meaning. Rather, the reader, who interprets the text

adds in meaning, is the true author. In "Death of the Author" (1967), Barthes writes, "as soon as

a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to

say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this

disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing

begins" (142). Functioning as a narrator, the author gives up their agency as a creator of meaning

and brings about their own demise. This demise of the author gives rise to the reader who, as the

sole interpretive force, is now the author. Electronic literature is arguably the visual

representation of this idea, as well as its antithesis. In *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo*,

Castillo-Garsow and Alvarado create environments for the reader to interpret, seemingly letting

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critical functionality" (screen 1). Though the author's presence may not be felt directly or
explicitly, it is still influential.

their visitors roam free through their fictive worlds without an authorial, guided tour. The writer, it might seem, has vanished. However, it is equally possible to read these sites as examples of intense authorial control. The authors did not simply claim a plotline as their story, but the entire surrounding world. It is also conceivable that a work of electronic literature might have a single narrative voice and plot, and use new media to enforce the author's view of how details within the story look, sound, and progress—details which otherwise would be under jurisdiction of the reader's imagination.

These theoretical interpretations of authorship result from the way an author exists in their surrounding culture, and the form of the text itself. Foucault, in particular, recognizes that the author function Barthes describes is unique to the medium and trends of their time, predicting that

> as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint—one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced. (119)

It is the nature of the medium, interacting with contemporary literary trends, that determines the role, and future roles, of authors. As such, a new medium will surely bring about a new type of author, which provokes Foucault to wonder:

> What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind

all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of indifference: What

difference does it make who is speaking? (120)

Foucault's questions concern the way authors, or speakers, exist in their medium, and to what

end. I, similarly, am interested in how authors write with this new language to draw out different

voices, perspectives, and conversations between different types of media. Electronic literature is

accompanied by changing tools with which authors craft their work, so that while the act of

writing emerges from existing practice and theory, like the technology of the medium itself, the

electronic platform requires a re-visioning of the nature and use of language.

1.2: Authors and Their Tools

How, then, do authors exist in the electronic platform, and how does this alter their

interactions with language and produced work? On a basic level, but not an unimportant one, the

electronic platform prioritizes authors' social and professional profiles and websites as links to

their work, their peers, and their inspirations. Authors can "like" pages on Facebook or re-Tweet

on Twitter, and because they exist in the same social space, there is less distance and more

conversation between readers and writers. There are also more complications. In this shared

space, for instance, distinctions between professional and amateur writers are blurred. Is a less-

than-prolific, self-proclaimed writer more of an author than a Tweet-happy Twitter-user,

releasing literary gems in 140-character increments? What about a novelist who tweets their

work? The distinction in types of writers, I argue, returns to the idea of stories as experiences.

Tweets and status updates are, primarily, a means of expression, while authored work is designed

with reader interaction in mind. This experiential quality distinguishes electronic literature from

casual postings. Authorship becomes more explicitly a matter of constructing interactive, non-

linear works for readers to actively navigate. Authors of electronic literature not only convey experience meaningfully, they produce it.

The electronic work, then, is the resulting product of the interaction between the author (the producer) and the multiple media used (the tools of production).[5] This is a historically distinct form of writing, I argue, that like the differences between vocalized and visualized words, encourages a different type of interaction with language, voice, and meaning. Benjamin recognizes this transformation in "The Storyteller," writing that "the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out … a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing" (87). He argues that the personal narratives of the soldiers returning from war lacked the wisdom of previous storytelling generations, but that this literary decay emphasized an old vivacity, "a new beauty," a new interaction with language. Benjamin describes this beautiful interaction as "weaving and spinning" layers on top of a story, adding new semantic patterns and designs, while keeping the "epic side of truth, wisdom" constant and accessible. The art of storytelling, according to Benjamin, arises from the ability to experience, in the present, a past or future moment. Electronic literature incorporates past technologies and traditions, and anticipates the future. The electronic platform allows authors to engage different types of media in conversation, and in a way that paper cannot, bring the text further into the "realm of living speech." This distinct way of writing, therefore, provides distinct ways of interacting with language, voice, and meaning.

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[5] Though a Marxist reading of these electronic works is of great interest to me, it is beyond the scope of this paper. As the artistic freedom these works can provide is equally matched by the constraints of technology and access, questions of societal and economic concern are not irrelevant, particularly in light of the recent Occupy movements, which were widely organized, supported, and broadcast through the Internet.

Though Benjamin is often referenced in artistic and literary discussions, scholars debate his status as a literary critic. Svend Larsen describes him as a "visionary diagnostician of culture" who is interested in the modern city, but notes that Benjamin

> does not focus on literature as a specific textual strategy…including how various genres function and are developed. He highlights the fragmented modern form that mirrors the fragmented experience iconically, not the narrative that, perhaps unsuccessfully, strives to establish a cohesive principle as a counterattack to the fragmented modern experience. Also ignored are the changes that narrative genres as a whole underwent in the urban literature of the 1990s. (Larsen, 135, 136)

Benjamin, in his analysis, uses what he finds relevant and illuminating, moving "freely between media, genres, and text types, treating them all together as one great text" which, according to Larsen, results in the lack of engagement with "deep-probing dialogues with the classical genres or subgenres, such as, for example, classical topological poetry as background for modern thematic treatments of urban life," and renders him ineffective as a literary critic (Larsen, 138). What does this suggest, then, for work that *is* a combination of media, genres, and text types? Larsen argues that "[Benjamin's] strengths in cultural analysis are precisely what make him so weak in literary analysis," but when the cultural collides with the literary, when technology is both a literary medium and product of its historical-cultural moment, it seems there may also be a shift in what it means to conduct literary analysis, and what constitutes appropriate and effective "thematic treatment" of a subject (Larsen, 138). The subject, afterall, can be increasingly complex in concept and form, represented with many types and genres of media, and includes the author and reader who enter into the space of the text through postings and comments. Though Benjamin may not have been a literary critic in and of his own time, a

collaborative, somewhat tangential approach like his would be appropriate to study and understand these collaborative, tangentially connected electronic works.

The electronic platform encourages authors to cross social borders by connecting people across time and space and artistic boundaries by putting different types of media in new types of artistic and literary conversation. The combination of the interactive and visual qualities illustrates the ways that oral-aural and print cultures have come together in electronic literature, demanding a new "system of constraint—one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced" (Foucault, 119). As *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo* demonstrate, digital media allow authors to incorporate reality with fiction, their work and those of others, and comments from visitors. The electronic platform has created a new type of artist – and a new type of vision. As Katherine Hayles describes, "To see electronic literature only through the lens of print is, in a significant sense, not to see it at all" (3). She calls this new literary creation "a 'hopeful monster' (as geneticists call adaptive mutations) composed of parts taken from diverse traditions that may not always fit neatly together" (4). Authors must reconcile these diverse parts, accept their imperfect fit, and craft virtual space as they would a sentence. There is a new role for the author as a creator, which might be filled by any type of artist, author, or curious mind.

Regardless of the author's intention, whether immortality or sacrifice, the electronic platform is open to any person willing to open their work. In the spring term of 2010 at Fordham University, Melissa Castillo-Garsow and Li Yun Alvarado began a class on new media, which asked them to consider, "What possibilities for creative projects lie in the malleability of the Internet — its multi-directional readability and possibilities for instant gratification editing?" (Keenan, screen 1). This exploration into "the multi-directional readability" produced distinct,

creative forms that allowed for distinct types of interaction. Castillo-Garsow and Alvarado, as instructed, integrated digital media with their creative work, utilizing the electronic platform to interact with and advance their work intellectually, as authors, and visually, as producers.

The homepage of *Street Space* is striking for its stark black and white design. Only the sections titles on the top scroll are written in red and before you totally get your bearings, Kool G Rap's "The Streets" begins to play its chorus: "The streets, yo where it happen at/The streets, is where they clapping at/The streets, is where the action at…" This somewhat abrasive introduction to the space appropriately conveys the harsh, direct immediacy of urban culture and creates a sense of survival: the typeface is standard, the design is basic and squared off, and its organization is straightforward. Admittedly, much of the site design is likely due to the hosting space, which again speaks to the accessible, grounded nature of the site. Castillo-Garsow takes "a spatial approach on both an academic and creative level," but her site remains far from the airs of academia, grounded in its purpose as an exploration of street literature and its roots.

De Salinas al Mundo, by contrast, has a distinctly softer tone, with no automatic music. A solid, pale green background offsets a squared arrangement of images, each of which leads to a poem, which takes the visitor deeper into the space and story. At first glance, the space is visually simple and yet deeply complex—for who can see an image and immediately understand its precise meaning? Images used in this allusive and associative form invite multiple, overdetermined, and even mutually exclusive interpretations. The narrative of this site, too, anticipates varied readings and interpretations. *De Salinas al Mundo* translates as "From Salinas to the World." It is, true to form, the story of a community in California, accessible to the entire broadband-connected world. Lady June, a young female writer, narrates a great deal of the story, but there are many other voices included in the site, which are both written and recorded. The

story follows one family's relationship to work, compromise, and each other. Both of Lady June's grandmothers, Marisol and Mercedes, worked in a Paper Mate factory in Salinas as pen testers, and decades later, June's cousin, Fernanda, works at Pan Global, a company whose "vision was to be the leader in airplane technology" ("About Pan Global," *de Salinas al Mundo*). The story is one of hard work, interconnected systems, the strength of communities, and the power of sharing and celebrating stories.

The electronic platform enabled Castillo-Garsow to continue her research on urban literature, thinking about it in new ways by introducing questions of an intellectual nature to a literary, visual application. She used this assignment to extend her study of space theory and this genre defined by its urban setting and culture, appropriately, by exploring a new space. When asked to distinguish her experience as an author of electronic work from that of print, she replied:

> What the website added was an additional way to engage with all this material. In addition to the spaces of the Urban [sic] world, what was the space of the internet [sic]? How could the space of the website bring to life the urban worlds that I was trying to engage with both in my own fiction and the authors I was looking at? How could the possibilities of this new technology add [to] the work of fiction in describing scene and developing character? (Keenan, screen 1)

This platform allowed Castillo-Garsow to engage differently with these urban worlds, arranging theoretical perspectives, hers and others, with raw materials from hip-hop culture, like music videos and news reports. Importantly, this act of constructing a space allows for a new way to understand how theory and practice fit with each other, and creates a distinct type of interaction with personal and individual ways of thinking. There is a different arrangement of ideas.

The operation of these sites, too, is accessible and personable, though in a way that may be shocking to some. In *de Salinas al Mundo,* Alvarado actively solicits engagement, asking questions to her readers in both Spanish and English: "What do you write with?" "What are your letters for" ("Lady June's Pencils," "Marisol's letters"). *Street Space* similarly features a colloquial relationship with its audience. One of Castillo-Garsow's fictional stories, "Boricua City," is "a new novel being written as you read" ("Boricua City," screen 1). The story closely follows the struggles and experiences of a young woman, Yris Colón Romero, from Spanish Harlem, "where the spics are, not the niggers" ("Boricua City," screen 1). Asked about the process of publishing a work-in-progress, Castillo-Garsow replied:

> As a writer it was very nerve racking. The material I put up on the website was very raw, and I was constantly editing as I go. THat's [sic] not how were [sic] trained to work as writers or academics- you don't put something out in public until it's perfected, but I think it's an interesting way to think about writing or research as a collaborative process instead of an [sic] solitary one. I was collaborating not just with those in workshop, but with the public. I think this is especially different for academia where you often don't engage with the public - in that way thinking about audience was very difficult. (Keenan, "Re: Street Space, screen 1)

Castillo-Garsow's observation that "you don't put something out in public until it's perfected" is reflective of the traditional, academic view of scholarship, and explains why digital authorship is sometimes seen as less prestigious than printed work. To say nothing of emoticons and Internet shorthand, typos and grammar mistakes can enforce the belief that a not-perfect work is not professional, or worthy of serious thought. Electronic literature allows for a new type of writing that allows for greater openness, perhaps to an uncomfortable degree for some, which focuses on

content and exploration of ideas over mechanics and protocol. Digital authorship, I argue, is more about creating an environment that will allow for discovery and interaction with ideas. These works of electronic literature are actively creative, collaborations of ideas that readers can experience.

1.3: Products of Authority

Street Space and *de Salinas al Mundo* each use different forms of media to let the story's message speak louder than its author's voice. Both works are layered with news articles and YouTube clips, along with vivid stories and poems, which serve primarily to illuminate overarching ideas rather than progress the plot, for there is scarcely a plot to move, and no moral to reach by the end. These sites function as explorations of an idea or place—*Street Space* of the creative and physical space in urban settings, *de Salinas al Mundo* of a factory-driven Hispanic community. Each author uses media to extend and reveal the subject at hand, so that readers do not question the reliability of the narrator in the same way they might in a plot-based text. These stories, though information-rich and elaborative, are far from journalistic, encouraging readers to try on subjective perspectives. *Street Space* includes many stories while *de Salinas al Mundo* has one primary narrative, but there are equally as many ways to read each site. The reader in these fictions is not treated like the shadow of a character or observant party, but the reader is integrated with the world, which is not purely fictive: they can watch music videos by artists they could see live in concert, read news articles published in a newspaper they could buy if they so desired. They can employ their agency as a person would, here, as a reader. *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo* show the way electronic literature can integrate the reader in their fictive world in a way that allows the readership agency, even a sense of ownership. Many forms of media,

styles of authorship, and reader engagement are integrated into the composition of these works, as they have been before, but now in an explicitly visual way.

  Street Space includes many narrative sections and forms and also a meditation by Castillo-Garsow on theories of space in the asphalt streets, dedicating her work to "the fascinating way space is socially constructed and place is employed in Street Literature" ("Street Space"). Street literature emerged in the 1990s, self-published and sold on street corners or from the trunks of cars ("So What do you Mean by Street Literature?"). Decades after Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, African-American communities are making themselves seen and heard—now writing, publishing, and selling their own stories, aided by the technology available. Much like the street life that inspired her work, Castillo-Garsow's fiction emphasizes community, interconnectivity, and the possibilities of creativity. The construction of this world creates a street-like environment where hyperlinks act as the underground transportation between video, music, image, and stories, so that a reader gradually develops a sense of the environment that lies above.

  The larger environment that produced and is present in each story is enhanced by a combination of fiction and nonfiction, by unconnected authors. One short story by Castillo-Garsow, "Habla Maricón*,"* is set in El Barrio in East Harlem, also known as Spanish Harlem. "Habla maricón" translates into a derisory "speak fagot." This title immediately brings the reader into this abrasive, demanding culture and introduces questions of voice: who is speaking, who is silent, and why? The page opens with a Spanish rap song, "Para mi barrio," by Vico C, and Maria, a transsexual teenager, standing alone across the street from a McDonalds. As an obvious outcast, Maria's voice is not listened to, in the same way that street literature and culture, is outcast from popular culture. The name "McDonalds" links to an article, "It's Tough To Eat

Healthy in Harlem," that describes the difficulty of finding affordable, healthy food in East

Harlem, while it is dangerously easy to eat fast food (Desai, *The Gothamist*). Maria reflects on

her days at school, and a link leads to an old coalition to improve the public schools in East

Harlem, citing a need for more and improved space:

> Classrooms in many of East Harlem's schools are badly overcrowded. Teachers are
>
> handicapped in trying to teach. Students are not given the concerned attention they need
>
> and deserve. Only 36% of our elementary and intermediate students read at grade level. If
>
> the empty PS 109 is renovated, it will immediately help provide more building space and
>
> make for more classrooms in our school district # 4. (Jose, "Coalition to Improve Public
>
> Schools")

The fundamental ability to eat healthily and receive a good education is location-specific, and is

shown to be very difficult in East Harlem. This background information adds context and a sense

of urgency to the story. It also adds a new depth and realism to Castillo-Garsow's overall

exploration of space and divisions. Just as her creative and academic explorations share the same

space, her fiction sits next to and between moments of stark reality. The electronic platform

connects photographs, Google maps, and articles with fiction to relate imagined and actual life

visually, whereas it can only be suggested in printed literature.

    Street Space is collaborative both internally, by linking different sections within the site,

and externally, by linking to maps, articles, petitions. In utilizing these external sources, Castillo-

Garsow explicitly demonstrates Barthes's argument that the author functions as a social

construct, appropriate to this socially connected network. She collects stories and facts about

world of street literature, and then constructs her own social sphere, *Street Space*. In some ways,

this construction of space removes her own voice; these are not all her words, her images, under

her authorial control. She has sacrificed her writing voice to the voice and environment of her characters. It would seem, in response to Foucault's questions: "Who can assume these various subject functions?" and "What difference does it make who is speaking?" that anyone who relates to the reader can claim a subject function, and perhaps it doesn't matter one bit who is speaking—after all, neither the narrator or author has control over these spaces. Rather, the subject does. The stories are not told, but as Foucault predicted, experienced.

De Salinas al Mundo is constructed so that different elements illuminate different aspects of the story, situating the reader in the position of a detective, or perhaps a curious author who is assembling information for their own narrative composition. The homepage shows a picture of a journal, paper files, a baseball hat, text message, camping site, and a compass—each of which is described by a short poem, which provides links to other areas of the site. The red baseball hat, for instance, is followed by a poem about Red:

These are Raul's, Carlos', Red's stories.

Men who fight.

Wear different hats.

Call (El) Camp(amento) Santiago homebase.

My grandfathers.

My brother (*de Salinas al Mundo*)

Even within Red's poem, it is not only his: it is "Raul's, Carlos', Red's stories." The connectivity within the text of the poem is mirrored by the use of digital media and linking throughout the site. Clicking on "Red" takes you to another poem, ostensibly a diary entry, titled "Puerto Rican Day Parade, Age 5" and invites reader responses, asking "What is your favorite color / Cuál es su color favorito?" There is direct and visually explicit connectivity between literary art forms, such

as poetry and diary entries, characters within the story, and the audience who is encouraged to respond to questions posed throughout the site. Digital media allows the author new ways of connecting facets of their work, connecting to their work, and connecting to their readers. Alvarado uses photographs and clips to function as evidence, while Castillo-Garsow uses the same media to create atmosphere, and Alvarado's text is descriptive rather than revealingly declarative, both sites become environments for the reader to experience.

These creative online works grant the reader agency in determining what they read and when, and what is important and not. The author provides the reader with greater opportunity to explore the fictive worlds they've created by adding multimedia that add different dimensions and perspectives to the narrative. There is greater connectivity within the text, between the author and the text, and between the reader and the text. These works of electronic literature are created, styled, and used in different ways, engaging with Foucault's question, "What difference does it make who is speaking?" and responding with, "What difference does it make who is reading?"

<u>Chapter 2: Reading Pages In Sites</u>

Or, perhaps, "What difference does it make how one is reading, and what divides they cross?" Electronic literature is a distinct artistic and literary form that blurs boundaries and sharpens questions about the production of text as well as its reception, providing new insights to old questions. The author, I have argued, is the creator—not necessarily of meaning, as Foucault and Barthes argue, but of *work*. The author produces a text. The reader thoughtfully engages the text to produce meaning. The important difference here is that the reader engages the *text,* while the author engages a subject—be it street literature or a community in California. Perhaps this is basic, but it is an important distinction. This chapter will focus on the ways readers engage with text, whether critically or simply for enjoyment. As *de Salinas al Mundo* and *Street Space* show, the electronic platform provides a way of interacting with text that paper cannot—after all, if printed works could connect to music and newspapers, they would need to be connected to a network, accessed by a browser. They would, in fact, need to be electronic. To understand how the process of reading electronic literature is distinct from, and similar to, traditional notions of reading, we will again examine both printed and electronic-focused theories.

First, we must ask, how should one approach artistic work? In Oscar Wilde's essay-play, "The Critic as Artist," Ernest and Gilbert discuss the roles of critics, artists, and art in a way that parallels this discussion of readers, authors, and text—a useful application for these electronic works that build upon both artistic and literary traditions. In a discussion of art criticism, Ernest asks Gilbert, "Why should the artist be troubled by the shrill clamor of criticism? Why should those who cannot create take upon themselves to estimate the value of creative work? What can they know about it?" (3). Ernest questions the role of the critic, for if art is produced by intrinsic motivations and individual thought processes, what can an external critic possibly contribute? It

would seem the artist and the critic are unconnected, and that the critic is unnecessary. However, Gilbert replies, "that spirit of choice, that subtle tact of omission, is really the critical faculty in one of its most characteristic moods, and no one who does not possess this critical faculty can create anything at all in art" (11). The artist, then, must be a critic. Authors of electronic literature, however, must have a different type of critical engagement because of the differences in creating text: the author must critically consider the relationships between colors, music, text, and genres. The reader also, encounters different, and sometimes unexpected, complications in reading such a body of work. How should one read a story in light of having seen a news clip, how does one pick what to read when? The uncertainty with which one might approach such a work as *Street Space* or *de Salinas al Mundo* is fitting, as it encourages a questioning, exploratory interaction with the text and there is no single or correct solution. The connective nature of electronic literature promotes exploration of ideas and pursuit of curiosities, appropriate to its form.

It is necessary to critically consider an object's form, as well as what is behind it, to establish this connection between the artist and viewer, or author and reader. This connection is established, as Benjamin argues, through shared levels of humanity. According to Wilde, behind art is man: "For there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual…The longer one studies life and literature, the more strongly one feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and that it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age" (11). This proclamation of an individual's power is both fitting and disruptive for electronic literature, as it is a form crafted through connected media, built on a platform of connected computers. Style and unity is at once determined by the individual author of a site, and composed of fragments from other people's

work. How might one read work that is artistically created and individual, yet found and collective?

In a world of so much *stuff*, Marcel Duchamp found that art became less about original creation of a product than its message. In an interview, Philippe Collin asked Duchamp about the meaning behind his Readymade collection, which featured such items as a hat rack ("Hat rack") and urinal ("Fountain"), both exhibited first in 1917. Duchamp responded, "There is always something 'ready-made' in a painting. You don't make the brushes, you don't make the colours, you don't make the canvas. So, taking this further, removing everything, even the hand, you arrive at the Readymade. There is nothing made by you: everything is 'ready-made'" (Collin, 37). The artist is necessary only for the choices they make: "you choose your colours, you choose your canvas, you choose the subject. You choose everything. There is no art, it's essentially a choice" (37). Or, there is art, and it is choice. In electronic literature, I have argued, the author assumes the role of a creator, and they do this by critically thinking and making choices about the inclusion and arrangement of different media. Importantly, there are choices inherent in reading as well. To move forward within a work of electronic literature, you must make a choice. In this sense, reading is an artistic act as well. Extending Wilde's argument that the critic is the artist, I argue that the reader is an artist, and part author, because of the choice-filled interaction required in electronic literature. They, too, produce their own experience.

Just as critics and artists are co-dependent, so too are readers and authors. Each influences and engages the other. I agree with Wolfgang Iser, that the reader "must actively participate in bringing out the meaning and this participation is an essential precondition for communication between the author and the reader. Rhetoric, then, may be a guiding influence to help the reader produce the meaning of the text, but his participation is something that goes far

beyond the scope of this influence" (Iser, 30). Iser extends this claim, arguing that the reader must critically consider and react to the author's work, for "the meaning of the novel only materializes in these reactions, since it does not exist per se" (32). Iser's extreme argument that meaning *does not exist* without the reader operates under the assumption that a person's reaction is essential to meaning. It is true that a reaction is proof of a connection to text, because to have a response requires interaction with an idea. However, in electronic works, connections can exist outside of the reader's mind. The stories of street life that compose *Street Space* might remind a reader of music videos they had watched or news articles they had read, and though this reaction cannot exist in cyberspace, the connection can. Electronic texts retain their relation to individuals and society through the hyper-linked connections to other work and media and therefore meaning can exist, at least in part, in the text itself. The cultural, factual, or historical connections a reader might make can be recreated in electronic literature, so that a poem in *de Salinas al Mundo* that references a soldier's letters can link to an external site that gives a brief history of Puerto Rico's 65th Infantry, "The Borinqueneers," whereas to make connection in printed text, the reader must recall this knowledge ("Marisol's Letters," *de Salinas al Mundo)*. Emotional and perceptive connections, by contrast, cannot be replicated and so the reader remains necessary, though not exclusively so, in the creation of meaning in electronic literature.

Iser draws on the necessity of emotional and perceptive reactions, arguing that texts require engagement by readers to be complete, and also that readers require texts to complete themselves. Because reading is an active process in which a work and its characters must progress, page after page,

> the text invites him to imagine for himself what would be the right reaction to the given
>
> situation, he is bound to make the necessary adjustments consciously, and … will make

the reader suddenly see himself as he really is, and so the role that he is to play in uncovering the hidden reality of the text will lead ultimately to his uncovering and correcting the hidden reality of himself. (36)

By relating actions of readers and characters, readers are given a distanced perspective from which to view their own perceptions and interpretations. By raising this awareness, the reader is granted a heightened sense of self. Iser argues that gaps in the text allow the reader "to bring both scenes and characters to life," and that "the technique mobilizes the reader's imagination, not only in order to bring the narrative itself to life but also—and even more essentially—to sharpen his sense of discernment" (39). The text, then, improves the critical faculties of readers, who navigate the author's imagined space and enliven fictive characters, as Foucault and Barthes argue. Authors weave and spin their story, as Benjamin says, while readers unravel it and focus to discover basic truths and wisdom. The discerning reader interacts with text in a way that allows their own imagination to take control of a narrative, and they become necessary not for their ability to make connections and produce meaning, but for the individuality they add to a text and the experience they co-create.

Despite the individuality necessary for reading, Holland organizes the nature of reading into four psychological principles that show the way that "a reader responds to a literary work by using it to re-create his own characteristic psychological processes" (Holland, 40). That these principles stand true for electronic literature highlights the fact that differences in printed and electronic works arise in matters of context and arrangement. We can see that in the same way readers of printed literature pay more attention to elements of a story they can relate to, a principle Holland titles "style seeks itself," readers of electronic literature will navigate through a site according to their interests. In *Street Space*, for example, a reader who is most interested in

social injustice will likely follow different links than someone interested in the use of space and the meaning of environment. A reader of *de Salinas al Mundo* who does not care for poetry might prefer to devote more time and attention to the YouTube clips and letters. The reader, in both printed and electronic work, will align with the character if they share similar reactions: "defenses must be matched" (115). The reader will only be able to relate to the text if it uses structures of defense or adaptation similar to their own, whether defensive and passive like Maria, who hides and dies for her sexuality in "Habla Marico," or offensive and assertive like Rasheeda Jones in "Pure Bronx". And while a reader may possess desire, a text—neither printed nor electronic—cannot: "The fantasy is not 'in' the work but in the reader or, still more accurately, in the creative relation between the reader and work" (117). It is *our* hope for Rasheeda and for Maria, and our dismay at Marisol's miserable factory job at Pan Global—these cannot be the text's desires and fears, for words themselves cannot feel. They can, however, emotionally involve the reader, and as "character transforms characteristically," a reader's character opens understanding to the social, moral, and intellectual complexities of the fictional characters and of the text itself. We understand the moral dilemmas of characters because we have experienced our own. Digital technology does not affect that we understand texts this way, but it provides a new environment for these texts to exist. We may read "Habla Maricon," or a poem, or a letter, but this is not the whole story. The story, rather, extends throughout the environment of the site, and the reader's individuality is integrated not only in readings of each text, but also in the navigation of the site as a whole.

  This personal involvement, according to Holland, is a necessary aspect of reading. If a reader does not have a personal experience within a text, he argues, they have not read, for "Each act of reading is constructive. It makes something new, something human, something personal—

or else no real act of reading takes place" (122). Holland argues that an individual's reading of the text makes it come alive for them, and there can be no single correct critique or interpretation for everyone. Works must be read and engaged with on an individual basis, and critiqued, then, for their ability to be experienced.

Roland Barthes addresses this intimacy between the text and its reader in a more visceral manner. He proposes that texts ought to engage the senses, not only critical faculties, to pleasure the reader. In "The Pleasure of the Text," Barthes argues for an experiential reading of texts in which a text might suggest an implication, rather than demand an interpretation, by way of flirting with its reader. The reader, then, can play with the text, toying with the language and teasing apart its meaning. According to Barthes, the value of a text is directly related to the satisfaction the reader takes from the author's presumably pleasurable rhetoric. He writes:

> If I read this sentence, this story, or this word with pleasure, it is because they were written in pleasure (such pleasure does not contradict the writer's complaints). But the opposite? Does writing in pleasure guarantee—guarantee me, the writer—my reader's pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out this reader (must 'cruise' him) *without knowing where he is*. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game. (4)

It is this game that is both a text's purpose and proof of existence. When readers engage playfully with a text, they give it meaning. The intention or identity of the author does not matter much, nor does it matter exactly who is reading—"it is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary." Like anonymous sex, Barthes argues an author, any author, should engage and open

a text with language so that a person, any person, may wrap their mind around the rhetoric and approach meaning.

But how, Barthes asks, can the meaning of a text escape its language? For "As soon as I name, I am named: caught in the rivalry of names. How can the text 'get itself out' of the war of fictions, of sociolects? – by a gradual labor of extenuation" ("The Pleasure of the Text," 30). Through the lack of singular, nonlinear narrative with many perspectives, styles, and genres, both *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo* breaks traditional boundaries of literature, extenuating into "a new philosophical state of the language-substance; this extraordinary state, this incandescent metal, outside origin and outside communication, then becomes language, and not *a* language, whether disconnected, mimed, mocked" (30-31). For language to be felt beyond phonemic grappling of words the reader must experience a world outside the structure of the text. Readers must understand its environment. In the same way the Internet is a network of computers, accessed by web browsers to retrieve overlaid information, language is a system that underlies meaning so that the text becomes more than a network—it becomes a space. Language is, like virtual space, felt and understood rather than expressly known. Stories are, to return to Foucault, experienced. The text satisfies its reader by joining with them in a subtle, seductive game of understanding, where the objective is not to claim victory over a text and its meaning, rather it is the pleasurable act of wrestling with words. A reader's active and thoughtful engagement completes the work.

Engagement in electronic literature, however, involves more than reading between the lines; the reader must read between different types of language. Just as the physicality of a book is part of the reading experience, the experience of reading electronic literature is entwined with its technology. This engagement of the text and its digital existence, according to Hayles,

"empowers electronic literature so that it not only reflects but *reflects upon* the media from which it springs. This reflexive feedback loop, whereby electronic literature registers media effects and also interrogates the media producing these effects, is central to electronic literature's potential to transform literary practices" (88). The site is created and read with a critical eye, not by looking to established rules and structures. This is a new language. Rather than describing an environment, the site *is* the environment. Hayles argues, "Among the arts, literature is privileged because it registers media's effects both psychologically and heuristically. But media strike the drumbeat; literature marches to the tune. Literature acts on the body but only within the horizon of the medium's technical capabilities" (89). That is to say, the type of interaction the reader has with the text is dependent on the form it takes, physical or immaterial, and the technology available.

This chapter has traced how readers engage with electronic literature and with its authors. I have argued that since readers of electronic literature occupy a more active role in determining their experience with the text than printed literature allows, they hold a more authorial and artistic position in relation to the text that readers of printed literature do. Readers interact with electronic literature in different and more expansive ways that are due, I argue, to the nature of the electronic platform. Through Ed Finn's study of Amazon consumer reviews, we will continue the exploration of the role and power of the reader while introducing the capabilities and possibilities of the electronic platform itself.

In 2011 at the Stanford Literary Lab, Finn collected data related to Amazon consumer reviews on works by David Foster Wallace as a way of examining changes in literary culture, provoked by our entrance into this collaborative, digital age. Finn argues that "millions of cultural consumers are now empowered to participate in previously closed literary conversations

and to express forms of taste through their purchases and reviews of books" (2). He chose to study Wallace, who had a unique writing style that resulted in "a cluster of texts that beckon readers almost invariably to read more Wallace" and whose "earnest narrative approach aspires to the unity of experience as we perceive it—the ways in which we stitch together mediated fragments and jumbled thoughts into coherent stories of ourselves … Wallace's work encourages readers to work together on this project of integration" (2). By studying this modern, digital age-inspired work, and through analyzing three separate networks of recommendations on Amazon from critical sources, professional reviews, and user reviews on Amazon, Finn compares conversations and consumption trends and illuminates new ways in which readers interact.

Comparisons of these networks reveal the different ways consumers and scholars categorize Wallace, a difference we would not notice without Amazon Reader Reviews, or the data that fills the "Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought" panel. Finn acknowledges the possibility that some of the connections are forced by college syllabi or comparative essay assignments, and that according to a survey by Trevor Pinch and Filip Kesler, 70% of the top thousand reviewers on Amazon are men, 92% have college degrees, and 39% of respondents report that they are engaged in or have been engaged in producing the same sorts of material that they review (Pinch and Kesler, 24-27). Nevertheless, these networks reveal that "Wallace is contextualized not just along genre lines but in very sophisticated ways" (Finn, 12). The electronic platform allows readers to interact with each other in deeper ways (as well as more superficial: Customer X also bought Y) and provides texts, too, with a greater, more intricate contextual frame. Notably, they also provide researchers with a more intricate contextual frame, and allow scholars to interact with work in different ways. Finn's innovative approach to research highlights a digital age trend in making explicit connections that otherwise would have

remained hidden. Finn's chart (see Fig. 2) is the representation of a network established through

Amazon consumer purchases, where books are nodes and recommendations are links. This chart

shows how "buyers of one Wallace book are highly likely to purchase another" and associates

texts that critics and scholars did not (10). Readers, evidently, are influenced by more or different

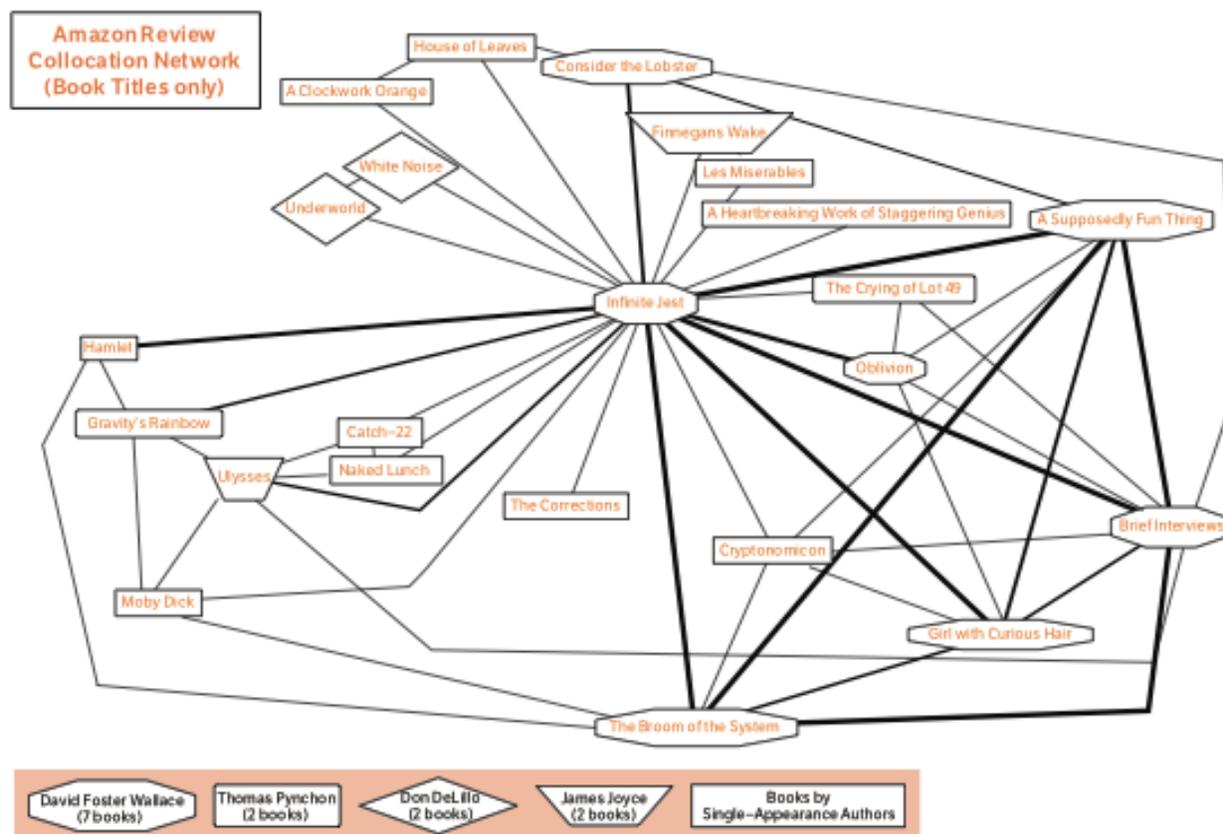factors than critics and scholars when deciding which texts relate.

Fig. 2, Amazon Network (Finn)

The electronic platform, as demonstrated through the Amazon marketplace, allows

readers to connect and converse in ways that paper does not allow and academia cannot predict.

The interactivity between readers and texts, and between media within electronic texts,

complicates our understanding of the reader's role: it has become, I argue, increasingly active

and exploratory. While authors of electronic literature construct their work with various

perspectives and tools, in some ways leaving less room for interpretation, the navigational movement of the reader through the site shows that space is created as much, or more, than it is eliminated. Since it is movement that creates sound, and it is printed words that allows for movement in language, it is the combination of verbal and visual elements that creates the multidimensional space of electronic literature that readers can explore. Just as the technology of the written world altered the form and function of language from oral cultures, the electronic platform creates new possibilities for written language. An idea can now be communicated not only through a sound, or a definable series of letters, but through image, video, and audio. An idea may be approached from differing perspectives through various media, creating a text that doesn't just communicate an idea—it allows the reader to experience it.

<u>Chapter 3: When </Text> Talks</u>

We have now examined how the form language takes affects its reception, and how the capabilities of its technology affect interactions by both authors and readers. I have argued that in electronic literature, the role of the author is to create an environment, rather than to cut a plotted path through one, and that the reader is an active explorer through this space, rather than a passive follower of a predetermined narrative structure. What, then, is this form that increases control as well as freedom, for authors as well as readers? This chapter will continue the exploration of works like *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo,* moving now from matters of production and reception to their construction, to better understand both electronic literature as a genre and its broader effects on other forms of literature. Through the *New York Times* Opinion blog by Stanley Fish and recent quantitative research I did for *Fiction Writers Review,* I will demonstrate how the electronic platform provides distinctively new ways for texts to engage with other texts, and for users to engage with text.

Since these texts are composed of digital media, it will be useful to first turn to a discussion about what media is, and how it is understood. Lisa Gitelman observes a divide in thinking of media either as scientific or artistic, and concludes that "the difference between the two is less about the way different kinds of history is written than it is about a deeply held mental map that people share" (4). I will return to the problem of how to categorize media, but I want to first focus on the last phrase: a "mental map that people share." Gitelman suggests that it is the network of cultural, social, and various other forces that determines one's inclination to view media as either science or art. Where our mental maps overlap, we agree in thought, so that those who view media as scientific have certain overlaps in the way they learned to think. Overlapping mental maps allow people to connect, and reveal, I argue, the significance of electronic literature.

The electronic platform, which grew out of academic and research-related collaboration, is still fundamentally a network of interconnected documents, of manifestations of users' mental maps. This also, then, explains the *reason* we use media: the use of media is how our mental maps manifest, and the presence of media on the electronic platform allows us to interact and connect with others.

Gitelman categorizes media in a broader sense as "socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation" (Gitleman, 7). Henry Jenkins, in his book *Convergence Culture,* elucidates: "Delivery technologies become obsolete and get replaced; media, on the other hand, evolve. Recorded sound is the medium. CDs, MP3 files, and 8-track cassettes are delivery technologies" (Jenkins, 13). This would mean, then, that YouTube clips, digital photographs, even hyperlinks, are delivery technologies while video, image, and text is media. Media evolves. What, then, is the convergent space electronic literature occupies? This space, I argue, becomes its own medium.

The Internet, because it functions both as an artistic, communicative space and virtual extension of the physical world, allows users to share and experience one another's mental maps, whether through social media networks or interaction with produced works. Both are means of expression and communication and both, Ronald Carter argues, are creative. In his book, *Language and Creativity,* Carter uses psychological, biological, and social evidence to argue that linguistic creativity is natural, innate, and very human—"not simply a property of exceptional people but an exceptional property of all people" (Carter, 13). As the Internet functions as an

extension of the physical world, populated and shaped by innately creative people, virtual space naturally becomes creative space.

In technologically developed nations, the Internet is used constantly to fortify one's existing lifestyle and relationships, and increasingly as a means of creative expression. Contrary to some cyber cynics, the Internet is not a substitute for a person's real life and relations, or a blanket for one's true self. Deeper investigation into how and why people use the Internet reveals that many are seeking a "third place": a term popularized by Starbucks, who didn't simply sell a five-dollar coffee, but a home away from home where you could read and relax by a fire or clean window. Similarly, social networking sites exploded the way they did because they functioned as a third place (Watkins, 58). Electronic literature functions in this same way as spaces to be enjoyed. They are places for the reader to pleasurably tease meaning from. The "creativity in everyday communication" is reflected in this medium that is creative, social, and interactive. The electronic platform is artistic space that a reader can occupy and explore, creating a realistic experience of fictive works. To return to the distinction between media and delivery technology, then, we could expect sites as spaces, as media, to evolve (along with evolving mental maps) while their components are replaced by new delivery technologies.

This is how art evolves. Tools are improved, materials change, and this, according to Benjamin, helps define a work's authentic aura by connecting it to a precise time and place. Benjamin argues that in order for a work of art to be authentic and have meaning, it must be connected to its moment of creation, when meaning was made. He argues that a replication of an art object cannot be considered art because it would represent the meaningful moment of creation and the *replication* of meaning, not meaning itself. He explains, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique

existence at the place where it happens to be … The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" ("Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 220). However, unlike an art object that can possess its own, distinct aura of authenticity as related to its time and place of origination, electronic literature evades both time and place. For as long as it exists as material connected to a network, it exists in flux, in active space. Reproductions are not necessary for circulation, because anyone can type in a URL and reach the original site. This suggests a need for a new understanding of originality and authenticity in work, for though *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo* are artistic and literary works, their content situated in time and space, their sites refuse the status of static objects. Electronic works constantly occupy their moment and place of origination, which is to say that they have no definitive moment of origination or completion.

Furthermore, because electronic literature functions both as an artistic object and third place, it has meaning even without our being there. When we shut off our computers, the space retains its collaborative construction just as when we leave Starbucks, the building continues to exist as a place of relaxation and expensive coffee. Electronic literature is constructed with various media and sources so that its function, as a creative place of collaboration, continues to exist when a reader is not online. In these third places, their construction contains meaning. When readers are not present, *Street Space* continues to connect fiction with reality, photographs with music videos, and invented characters with cultural icons. *De Salinas al Mundo* remains an active site composed of poetry, prose, and reader comments. The meaning of these connections continues to exist because they are built into the site, whereas a text that requires interaction by a reader to come alive turns simply into a physical object when not being read. In electronic literature, connections do not exist only in the reader's mind; rather, these connections are

established between components of the site, built into the electronic platform itself. The Internet, an extension of social, artistic, and even economic life, functions somewhat like a reader's mind in that it is the place for references to connect.[6] The main differences are that while the Internet is a communal space, our minds are individual, and while we see this platform visually, we can only see our thoughts mentally. The electronic platform allows us to project our mental maps into virtual space and navigate them, adding individuality to the experience of reading a text, but not the entirety of the text's meaning.

Unlike Iser who argued that without a reader the text has absolutely no meaning—it is the unheard sound of a tree falling in a forest—I want to suggest there is loud, creative space that constantly exists. According to Iser, it is the active connection with an object that proves existence: the action of *listening* to the tree fall proves the existence of sound, *reading* a text proves the existence of meaning. In this analogy, the network of computers parallels the forest in which a tree, the text, falls with the accompanying thud of meaning. Accessing this network through a browser, establishing an active connection with a site, is the loud moment in which meaning is created. However, unlike a printed book that can be misplaced and lost, in which case its meaning is also lost, electronic literature exists in a state of connectivity, attached to a network for as long as it exists (though to be sure, electronic files also go missing and cease to exist). The connections created by the author between distinct stories, songs, and photographs in *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo* exist without a reader's critical gaze; the texts are connected through hyperlinks. In these sites, the manifestation of creativity is woven into the medium, unlike disembodied words on a page. Active connection in electronic literature is lasting, not momentary. It is a sound heard 'round the world.

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[6] Though software does not think as humans do, the gap between data and its representation is strikingly similar to that between Saussure's "sound image" and "concept."

The connections within electronic literature are necessary for it to exist on the electronic platform. This type of literature cannot exist in printed form. It exists, rather, through a combination of software and hardware. Software enacts a set of instructions created by a programmer, so that while hardware can be touched and its effects seen, software itself is ungraspable. By way of explanation, Wendy Chun compares software to culture, where hardware is nature (2). She writes that "although technologies, such as clocks and steam engines, have historically been used metaphorically to conceptualize our bodies and culture, software is unique in its status as metaphor for metaphor itself," a troubling concept because unlike metaphors, which clarify the unknown by means of the known, software is unknowable (2). However, Chun argues that this contradiction

> grounds software's appeal. Its combination of what can be seen and not seen, can be known and not known—its separation of interface from algorithm, of software from hardware—makes it a powerful metaphor for everything we believe is invisible yet generates visible effects, from genetics to the invisible hand of the market, from ideology to culture. (2)

Software, as the action behind the creation of sites like *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo*, is rather like an author—and a reader. It does the action of making an idea come to life. And, in the same way that software interprets instructions and creates the work that is interpreted, Chun argues, "The distinction between programmers and users is gradually eroding. With higher-level languages, programmers are becoming more like simple users" (46). This conflation of programmers and users, I argue, represents the conflation of authors and readers.

The electronic platform has created a distinctive approach to literature, and

understandably, to knowledge as well. Chun argues that "Software as thing has led to all 'information' as a thing. Software as thing reconceptualizes society, bodies, and memories in ways that both compromise and extend the subject, the user" (6). Categorizing information as a "thing" can be dangerous because, as Chris Bailey and Hazel Gardiner explain, "how a 'thing' is intellectually conceived, structured and referred to is negotiable and dynamic. The process of categorization necessarily stems from this process, locking the 'thing' into a near-rigid intellectual framework" (Bailey and Gardiner, 47). For software to work, data must be given labels, and these labels must be prioritized so that expression does not exist simply as an expression, but it is translated into data and labeled as A, B, and C. It becomes a thing. This categorization of information as things by software can lead to less freedom, a "near-rigid intellectual framework." Further, as Chun argues, software reorganizes society and bodies by shifting the way we interact and commune, and memory for the way it continually formats and reformats, and stores and deletes information. This also means, as Chun explains, that "the experiences of using—the exact paths of execution—are ephemeral. Information is 'undead': neither alive nor dead, neither quite present nor absent" (Chun, 133). It would seem that information (not the author, nor the reader) is undergoing a process of death and simultaneous resurrection: a new mode of existence. There is a new language, and a new way that texts—and their authors and readers—exist and connect.

The electronic platform, which presents new types of connection and discovery, also creates new ways of evaluating truth. Chun cites computers as having created a "decline in and frenzy of visual knowledge," relating it to the widespread use of digital cameras. Digital images are written—and importantly, *rewritten*—to memory cards, and therefore lack a "fixed relationship between captured event and image … Digital images, in other words, challenge

photorealism's conflation of truth and reality: the notion that what is true is what is real and what is real and what is true" (Chun, 15). This is not to say digital photographs cannot be trusted, simply that their relationship to what is true and real has become complicated, much the way our own relationships to each other and to information require critical consideration and questioning.

This is also not to say that everything on the Internet ought to be distrusted but it does, funnily enough, lend greater weight to names and sources. Is the author reputable? Is the publishing organization trustworthy? And how does this relate to our larger question of the interactivity and dynamism of texts? Stanley Fish, a postmodern literary theorist, wrote an opinion piece for the *New York Times* in early January of this year. He calls it a "blog" with what seems a confessional sigh: "This is a blog. There, I've said it" (Fish, "The Digital Humanities," screen 1). Fish has resisted the designation because "blogs are provisional, ephemeral, interactive, communal, available to challenge, interruption and interpolation, and not meant to last … I have been building arguments that are intended to be decisive, comprehensive, monumental, definitive, and, most important, all mine" (Fish, "The Digital Humanities," screen 1). Fish's self-conscious admittance that his work is a blog illustrates the way many people view scholarship as exclusive and decisive, possessing an 'all mine' mentality. Fish's opinion blog, however, discusses contemporary critical scholarship effectively, accessibly, and appropriate to form, with his opinion. He is a respected theorist writing for a reputable paper. This blog represents not a downgrade in scholarship or worth, but simply a change in form.

In his first blog post concerning the digital humanities, Fish discusses how digitization affects scholarship and in his second, the effects on humanities. Building off the ideas of contemporary scholar Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Fish notes that "long-form scholarship … needs the interdependent notions of author, text and originality. In the traditional mode of scholarship, a

credentialed author – someone with a Ph.D. or working toward one – gets an idea (that's the

original part) and applies it to a text or set of problems, and produces, all by himself, a new text"

(Fish, "The Digital Humanities," screen 1). Fitzpatrick argues in her book, *Planned*

Obsolescence, that authorship in a networked environment will necessarily become multi-author,

but I want to argue for a distinct role of the individual author as one who creates, who assembles

and arranges. This is not the same as Fitzpatrick's notion of multi-authorship, which suggests an

inevitable and somewhat arbitrary interpenetration of works. The author can, as shown in *Street*

Space and *de Salinas al Mundo*, choose which external sources they align with and it is in this

act of choosing that the author regains their individuality, their 'all mine' stake on their work, for

these works do not come ready-made.

Fish, like Fitzpatrick, argues that in this networked environment of authors, no one

person can be the single creator of meaning, and no single work can contain complete meaning;

there is "meaning everywhere and nowhere, produced not by anyone but by everyone in concert,

meaning not waiting for us at the end of a linear chain of authored thought in the form of a

sentence or an essay or a book, but immediately and multiply present in a cornucopia of ever-

expanding significances" (Fish, "The Digital Humanities," screen 3). This is precisely the

phenomenon I want to explore. Is the author now simply another participant, present in this

seemingly cloudlike space with the reader and all connected information? Fish describes this

space as divine, "where there is no distance between the would-be knower and the object of his

cognitive apprehension because, in Milton's words, everyone is everything and 'all is all'" (Fish,

"The Digital Humanities," screen 3). However, it seems to me there must be some distinctions

left between the author, the reader, and the text. Since as software itself is unknowable, there

must remain some distance between the viewer and the subject, the would-be knower and

knowledge. Even if, as Fish says, "everyone has access as a node or relay in the meaning-producing system," there is still plenty of room for interpretation and play (Fish, "The Digital Humanities," screen 2).

Fish builds off Stephen Ramsay's description of the ludic nature of digital humanities research, which has a more flexible approach than traditional academia does. Traditional humanities scholarship leads with an "interpretive hypothesis and then the formal patter, which attains the status of noticeability only because an interpretation already in place is picking it out. The direction is the reverse in the digital humanities: first you run the numbers, and then you see if they prompt an interpretive hypothesis" (Fish, "Mind Your P's and B's," 3-4). Fish notes that numbers alone are not an argument. They must be interpreted, and often, these interpretations require context. But, as Matthew Wilkens points out, these text-mining experiments allow us to sift through vast amounts of information and find trends that would have otherwise been hidden, simply because a human reader could not possibly read the masses a computer can, and with as much precision. A computer, without an interpretive hypothesis directing a reading, simply collects data so that there is no single conclusion but many, as many ways as there are to view data. Ramsay compares this method of research to browsing, moving arbitrarily, through a store, and questions whether academia can benefit from, and cede to, alternative ways of combining theory and practice, interpretation and data?

It seems only fitting that the study of electronic literature, which restructures components of oral and printed language, is also restructured. Electronic literature places the author in the role of a collaborative creator, the reader as an active explorer, and the text as a dynamic space, as opposed to an object. Its study, then, should be a similarly collaborative act that considers various types of information, media, and research styles.

3.1: As Seen On: Fiction Writers Review

In September 2010, two students and I began researching for *Fiction Writers Review*, an online literary journal, to discover how similar literary organizations attract and maintain an audience, and how readers interacted with literature online. Which sites had the best or most frequent content, most polished web design, and how did this relate to their traffic ranking, and their average number of comments? In a comprehensive excel sheet, we surveyed over 200 of the most popular literary websites and organizations, including online journals and magazines, print journals that had made the transition online, bookstores, small publishers, and blogs. We organized and quantified data in over 50 categories, including site polish, types of content, quantity and type of social media, and audience engagement on the actual sites.[7] With this data, we were able to find correlations and trends to qualify, or debunk, initial predictions. Though we did have driving questions at the outset of our research, as traditional research does, they were big, vague, and useful only in that they provided categories of information we wanted. In practice, we mined data the way digital humanities does, and drew interpretations from the evidence.

We found, surprisingly, that there was an insignificant correlation between aesthetics and audience engagement. Only 28% of sites were ranked as above average in "Overall Aesthetics"

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[7] We divided "polish" into two categories: "aesthetics" ("How unique is the site design? Does it feel like an ordinary template? 10 is most unique") and "currency" ("Are there imbedded videos, web 2.0 menus, etc.? 10 is most current"). "Content" included blogs, original writing, reviews, use of new media, frequency of publishing, number of contributors, and whether visitors had to be members and/or pay for access. "Social media" included type and frequency of Facebook and Twitter use, and "audience engagement" included how many people commented, and how frequently.

(7, 8, or 9). Of the sites that allowed commenting, only 17 sites received an above average ranking in aesthetics while 53 sites were ranked below average (2-6). Of the above average sites, 70% averaged at least 1 comment, while 74% of the below average sites averaged at least 1 comment. It does not appear that a better looking website will yield more audience participation, and in fact, the reverse might be true. There were far more sites in the mid-range of aesthetic quality, and they did as well or better than the above average sites in terms of audience engagement. It might be worth noting that the better looking sites were also the professional sites—institutions had the highest average aesthetic ranking, followed by non-profit organizations, and for-profit companies. It may be that these sites, which tend to be more structured than personal sites and smaller literary organizations, invoke a more formal relationship with their audience, so that readers are less inclined to comment or respond to posts.

Overwhelmingly, though perhaps understandably, audience participation on Facebook and Twitter pages was passive. A Facebook page for a literary journal occupies a somewhat confusing space: it does not perfectly fit with the personable nature of a social network, or the literary nature of a journal. Evidently, audiences did not know how, or simply were not compelled, to interact with these pages. Perhaps readers of established journals do not find the online format engaging or simply are not used to participating actively and responding in forums. However, of the top ten sites (ranked by Alexa, a worldwide trafficking site), six were established organizations and four originated online. While journals that do have a physical presence on bookshelves and in libraries do have higher traffic than do organizations that began online, it is only by a slim margin. It matters more what type of environment these sites create when they become electronic, rather than the space or reputation they held before.

One of the most conclusive correlations we found was between currency and audience engagement. Nearly 90% of sites deemed "more current" (a ranking of 6-10) received at least one comment, while about 70% of the "less current" (a ranking of 1-5) websites received at least one comment. Of the sites that appeared more current, over 50% received between 6-20 comments and of the sites that were less current, over 50% were in the lower range of 1-5 comments. Audiences are attracted to what feels relevant, rather than what is rankably "polished." They are attracted to places they want to visit, rather than the ones that simply look beautiful, revealing how engagement with online works depends on the environment of the site.

Audience engagement also depends largely on the audience targeted. Audiences were categorized as underground, emerging writers, professional, academic, enthusiast or readers. Websites for "enthusiast" audiences were defined by their encouragement and suggestions regarding the craft of writing, essentially "how-to" websites. 80% of enthusiast websites averaged at least one comment per thread. Websites geared toward readers, an audience not interested in the "behind-the-scenes" of writing but simply good literature, averaged at least 1 comment 69% of the time. Sites geared toward "underground" audiences, which were characterized as hip, experimental and anti-establishment, averaged one comment per thread only 20% of the time. Activity on a site, then, depends both on the environment of the site and the type of user it attracts. It is easy to see in this context how the author and reader are codependents, that each contributes to the environment that is the text.

Through Google Analytics, we are also able to track when and how readers engage with a site—a type of information not easily attained for printed works. A study from September 2011-February 2012 reveals that the audience of *Fiction Writers Review* visits the site during the work day, between 9 am and 6 pm, with its highest peaks from 12-1 pm and 3-5 pm. Of the top ten

most trafficked pages, three were from the "Blog" section of the site.[8] This suggests that people

read *Fiction Writers Review* during their lunch break, and perhaps during a mid-day break, and

read the blog with disproportionate frequency. This does not necessarily mean the blog is the

most interesting part of the site, or that *Fiction Writers Review* should refocus the intention of the

site according to audience traffic patterns. It simply means that the audience, who reads primarily

during working hours and especially during breaks at work, reads blog entries—which are quick

and easily read—with more frequency than essays. Data on how an audience uses a site,

however, *can* help organizations create a more effective space for communication. Sites become

third places that seek to involve the author and reader in a mutually beneficial relationship,

making communication as effective as possible. As Finn discovered in his study of reader

reviews, "websites like Amazon have succeeded not just by dint of cost-cutting efficiency but

because they have fostered new kinds of community around their products" (Finn, 4). People are

not simply searching for a product; they are searching for a place.

Longer survey periods also reveal the way old content can achieve new life, for the way it

connects to people. An interview with Jesmyn Ward was published on August 19, 2009, when it

received the highest amount of page views, but then in mid-September 2010, when Ward was

nominated for the National Book Award, traffic rankings of that interview spiked again.

Electronic content, because it is connected directly to people, can have new life and relevance

beyond its immediate intention. It is also notable that Lee Thomas's 2009 review of *Little Bee,*

by Chris Cleave, still garners a significant amount of traffic. This is, most likely, because Cleave

recommends this review on his website. Again, old content can have new life, due to cultural

relevance, or due to collaborations and connections within other highly trafficked sites.

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[8] Other sections include "Reviews," "Essays," "Interviews," "Contributors," "Submissions," and "About."

While it is useful for organizations like *Fiction Writers Review* to utilize connections and collaborations with other journals, in that it garners more attention and traffic for both partners, the implications of connectivity and collaboration in works like *Street Space* and *de Salinas al Mundo* are slightly different. In these works, the videos, musicians, and news reports are not part of a cohesive or intentionally collaborative act. None of these secondary contributors had any idea their work was going to be a part of such projects. Unlike organizations that benefit from associations, authors of these sites use external sources to enhance their stories and enable deeper engagement from readers. These materials are picked and gathered from the "real world" of the Internet landscape, the "global village."[9] The Internet is a shared space where information is readily available, resulting in easy and frequent collaboration—both intended and unintended. The electronic platform not only reformats artistic expression, but also reformulates the role of authors, readers, and the surrounding atmosphere of discovery.

Though *Fiction Writers Review* is an online journal of mostly printed works, its purpose in promoting quality reviews of fiction and as a community "by, for, and about emerging writers" could not exist without the electronic platform. Like *Fiction Writers Review, de Salinas al Mundo* and *Street Space* seek to create places for readers to explore and inspire conversations, and would not be possible in printed form. The functionality of these sites is intricately connected to their medium. The accessibility of Fish's blog, too, is mirrored in form and function. While his work could be printed and make sense, it would not be able to link to other resources or inhabit the same constant, accessible space on NYTimes.com. Any form a text may take, whether it is oral, written, or digital, possesses different qualities and limitations and thus functions differently. The electronic platform has created new roles of authors and readers, and it

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[9] This term was popularized by Marshall McLuhan, referencing the way the lack of physical distance and time constraints makes the world seem as small and connected as a village.

is the evolution these roles alongside changing artistic and literary theories that has led to the

creation of electronic literature.

Conclusion

It is telling that what began as a question about the interaction between image and text in electronic literature became a project that needed to understand authorship, readership, and the texts themselves. That little question, like the smooth outer shell of a computer, lies at the surface of intricate inner workings of history and theory. Electronic literature represents in some ways the culmination of artistic and literary theory, and in other ways defies it. This form at once continues and disrupts the trajectory of academic and creative thought. Fish, a respected academic, blogs that there are "two attitudes digital humanists typically strike: (1) we're doing what you've always been doing, only we have tools that will enable you to do it better; let us in, and (2) we are the heralds and bearers of a new truth and it is the disruptive challenge of that new truth that accounts for your recoiling from us" ("Mind Your P's and B's," screen 1). Here, Fish refers to the way digital humanities challenge traditional criticism and theory by collecting evidence and then extracting an interpretive conclusion, rather than finding evidence based on an interpretive hypothesis. While traditional argumentation seeks to establish an "all mine" stake on an argument, the research style of the digital humanities seeks to question, and to create an environment in which questions continue to grow.

My own project was sparked by an interpretative hypothesis, that the electronic platform provides a distinct way of reading, or experiencing, a text. Evidence mined from *de Salinas al Mundo* and *Street Space* have illustrated ways in which authors and readers interact—similar to and different from printed literature—and the masses of data collected for *Fiction Writers Review*, which can now be formulated to answer any number of questions, quantified the ways readers interact with literature online, as well as electronic literature.

This thesis aims, like the form of electronic literature itself, to engage past and present theory, and artistic and literary genres; like the form of academic work, to clarify my own position in regards to the changing interactions between authors, readers, and texts; like the digital humanities, to also provoke further questioning. Where will the collaborative evolution of form and function go next? The answer, I believe, nods to the shifting interactions between authors, readers, and texts, and gestures toward the new ways of interacting with research and criticism.

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