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# On the Writing, Reading and Publishing of Digital Stories

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**Purpose** - This paper describes a study set up to investigate and map the landscape of digital writing today. A holistic perspective has been adopted involving writers, readers and publishers alike.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research uses a qualitative approach and combines interviews and direct observations. In in-depth interviews 13 participants (4 writers, 4 publishers, 3 readers and 2 on-line readers) were questioned for their opinions on issues related to writing, publishing and reading digital fiction. The 3 readers were also observed while interacting, for the first time, with three digital stories.

**Findings** - Results show that the area is still unsettled though much excitement surrounds experimentations and freedom of publishing online. Readers seem uneasy with the role of co-creators that writers want to assign them and prefer linear stories to more deconstructed ones. Writers like to experiment and combine multiple media and readers like to interact with multimedia stories; this seems to open interesting perspectives over interactive narrative. Publishers are not yet involved in digital writing and this is seen simultaneously as a blessing (unfiltering of innovative ideas) and a curse (lack of economical support, lack of quality selection). Despite disagreement and ambiguity all interviewees agree that digital fiction will come, likely prompted by new reading technology.

**Originality/value** – This paper is the first attempt to understand the phenomena of digital writing taking into consideration the perspectives of writers, readers and publishers simultaneously and comparing their different views.

**Keywords** - Digital fiction, qualitative study, reading, writing, publishing.

**Paper Type** Research

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is now twenty years since what is considered the first hypertext fiction, Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a story* (Joyce, 1990), was demonstrated at the ACM Hypertext Conference in November 1987. Digital writing has since been the focus of much research, mostly in the area of literary criticism (see (Macey, 2000) for an overview), and communities of enthusiastic online-writers and online-readers are flourishing. Nevertheless, digital fiction is still a niche phenomenon: "digital fiction does not feature on the bestseller lists, prominent publishers are not publishing it and readers are buying more print books than ever" (Turner, 2006).

The research reported in this paper was set out to understand why this is so and to map the current landscape of digital fiction, here intended as a text-based story written specifically for publication by electronic means that is written and read with a computer.

The study takes a holistic bottom-up approach looking at the writers who are experimenting with digital formats, the publishing industry involved in print and digital books and the reaction of readers. Writers, publishers and readers were interviewed on the three issues of writing, publishing and reading digital fiction; their different views were compared. Readers (of print books) were also asked to try some digital stories, their reaction was observed and their opinion recorded.

The structure of the paper is as follow. Section 2 provides an overview of the ideas and activities surrounding digital writing. The study is described in section 3. Sections 4 reports the results on writing, publishing and reading and section 5 concludes the paper.

## 2. OVERVIEW ON DIGITAL WRITING

Taking a look at the range of terms applied to digital fiction shows the diversity and divisiveness of the current thinking and writing in this area. There is hypertext fiction, sometimes used interchangeably with interactive fiction (Bolter and Joyce, 1987; Bolter, 2001), although interactive fiction is generally used to refer to computer games (Gibson, 1996; Crawford, 2005). Interactive fiction is thus sometimes avoided in favour of participatory fiction (Glasner, 2004; Murray, 1999). Cybertext is used to refer to a dynamic text (Aarseth, 1997). Then there is multimedia fiction, hypermedia fiction, hyperfiction, non-linear, multi-linear and creative writing in new media. Of course even the fiction is not a given, frequently replaced by narratives, stories, storytelling, literature, creative writing, text. The necessity of differentiating between print books and digital fiction is key. Fiction, literature, novel; all conjure images of books. There is an underlying assumption that they are printed matter. As such there is no need for an adjunct; we do not say printed novel, physical literature, analogue fiction. At the opposite, there is a lack of agreed terminology to indicate what writing in and for the digital medium is. Electronic literature

has been defined by the Electronic Literature Organization<sup>1</sup> as “works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer”. Sloane sees digital fiction as “stories that are written and read on computer” (Sloane, 2000). Yet Leroy and Pattyn<sup>2</sup> use digital narrative to refer to “stories told upon, with and by computers and their respective users”. Douglas (Douglas, 2001) similarly uses digital narrative to refer to narrative-focused computer games using it as a contrast to hypertext fiction.

The idea of using computers to tell stories is unsurprisingly as old as computers themselves and the combination of computer and literature has attracted much interest from literary criticism that in turn has influenced digital fiction. Stanley Fish was central in suggesting the reader creates meaning: “according to Fish readers do not decode poems; they make them” ((Macey, 2000):130). Barthes’ introduced the concept of the writerly text and the readerly text (in Macey, 2000 : 405). The “readerly” text uses the understood, unconscious codes of storytelling to present meaning to the reader; the “writerly” text purposefully disrupts these codes forcing the reader into making meaning. Lanham sees the struggle between screen and page as a reflection of the philosophical “alternation of speech and narrative patterns,” the result of which will be a return “from a closed poetics to an open rhetoric” (Lanham, 1993 : 24-25). As a metaphor, the computer is a far greater model for human creativity and the human mind than a book (Bolter, 2001). Andrew Gibson discusses how interactive fiction (in the form of video games) is reshaping narrative theory or rather returning writing styles to a form resembling the space of thought (Gibson, 1996).

Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon, a story* is generally considered to be the first hypertext fiction, but digital fiction also has an older heritage in the form of MUDs (multi-user dungeon sometimes dimension or domain). The first MUD was devised in 1980 and participants built up a virtual community through shared textual descriptions. Today writers are using Flash and hypermedia in stories, incorporating music and images building around the idea of hypertext. Online writing communities like FictionPress.com and FanFiction.net, are also an emerging phenomenon where amateur writers can post their stories for anyone to read, readers can leave reviews about stories and can contact the writers directly via author pages. Similarly the world of computer games is developing more sophisticated narrative structures.

### 3. THE STUDY

#### 3.1 Methodology & Participants

The aim of this study is to produce a snapshot in time of the landscape of digital fiction as seen by writers, publishers and readers. In-depth interview was the main research method used, integrated by observation of the (print) reader while interacting with three examples of digital fiction (see 3.3).

Four (4) writers, 4 publishers, 3 print-readers and 2 online-readers were involved in the study. All were interviewed; the three (3) print-readers were also observed whilst reading digital fiction for the first time and questioned on this experience.

The writers were identified through their activity in trAce<sup>3</sup>, an online writing community, and have a varied background: W1 works solely in the digital domain coming from a design background; W2 was an established print writer who has begun to experiment with the digital medium for storytelling and is involved in teaching writing courses for new media; W3 was a poet and W4 a writer of fanfiction online. The limited size of the sample was due to the attempt to keep a balanced view of the three parties: while there is abundance of readers and writers could be found quite easily, publishers are harder to approach and very rarely are willing to give their time.

Of the publishers two were print publishers (P1 and P2) and two had an online presence; OP1 published hypertext fiction, OP2 worked for a print publisher but also published a print journal of experimental fiction which advertises online.

The three print readers were identified from their participation in reading groups (contacted via local libraries) (R1, R2, R3).

The two readers of online fiction were identified through their participation in popular online writing communities of writers and readers of traditional linear text stories (OR1, OR2). The online readers thus provided a useful insight into the community aspect of reading stories online but were aware of, albeit less familiar, with other forms of digital fiction.

#### 3.2 Data Collection

Four different semi-structured interviews were designed, each tuned on the interviewee’s group, but all sharing the same general schema (see Appendix):

1. the starting aimed at defining “digital fiction” and other related terms, e.g. hypertext, interactivity;
2. the main body investigated the interviewee’s role in depth, writing, publishing or reading;
3. the final section asked interviewee’s opinion on the other two roles thus providing alternative perspectives.

Though the core of questions was the same, the main part were specific for a certain role.

Interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and were conducted in July and August 2006. All interviewees (excluding the authors) were given the choice on the interview mode, online through instant messaging, via telephone or face-to-face. Audio data were transcribed. The

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<sup>1</sup> <http://eliterature.org> [accessed 4.3.2009]

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dreamingmethods.com/fractured/>[accessed 4.3.2009]

<sup>3</sup> <http://tracearchive.ntu.ac.uk/> [Accessed 4.3.2009]

quality of the collected material was compared: similarly to (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2003), no discernable difference in quality or quantity (similar number of words) of the data gathered through the different communication modes was found.

The three print readers were observed while reading a pre-selected range of digital fiction. The observer looked specifically for the overall demeanour of the reader, how the reader moved their cursor on the screen and what they clicked on. Readers were encouraged to verbalise their thoughts and their comments were recorded. This provided additional evidence that complemented the subjective view expressed in the interview.

A variety of writings were chosen to show the range and development of digital fiction:

- Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a story* (1987): a plain-text hypertext story without a navigational map;
- *Book of Waste* (2006) from Andy Campbell<sup>4</sup>: a hypertext with graphics and a visual map of the structure;
- *Inanimate Alice* (2006) by Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph<sup>5</sup>: a linear story that uses graphics and music requiring the reader to complete certain tasks to move the narrative along.

Readers were also shown the FictionPress.com website where they browsed the author pages and range of stories available.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were coded: key phrases were highlighted and labelled. The labels were arranged into main themes and organised in topics to compare the opinions of the different groups. Comments were clustered by topic affinity, disregarding where the comment was in the interview flow; those that fit more than one topic were duplicated.

Next section summarises the results: the topics found during the analysis are the headings of the subsections. When considered useful snippets extracted from the interview are used, clearly marked and labelled with the speaker identifier.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Defining Digital Fiction

As discussed in section 2, digital fiction as a style of writing does not have a fixed label and digital fiction as a label has not yet been given a definitive definition. Using "digital fiction" as a phrase that is fluid allowed discussion of such a tricky and ethereal subject at the beginning of the interview. The interviewees were encouraged to provide their own terms and explain their understanding and definition of these terms.

#### 4.1.1 What Writers Call Their Work

Terminology proved to be an issue for all of the writers, making the talking about and understanding of digital narratives complicated: "Nobody knows quite what to call it, seems that whatever you call it nobody quite understands what you're talking about" (W2). 'Multimedia' was a term frequently used but deemed to be a default and inadequate term, unable to express all of the attributes a digital work has such as interaction.

'Digital writing' was seen as encompassing all forms of writing created, stored and accessed electronically. However, writers were keen to separate e-books or websites that allow writers to publish their plain textual linear stories (considered for amateur writers) from digital works that are more adventurous and cannot be re-created in print format (considered professional). Despite these clear boundaries, there are no definitive terms that would help to identify and distinguish these two spheres.

Writers were less than keen to use the word 'hypertext' to describe their work as it was perceived as "old-school" (W1), "ten years on" (W2). In this sense hypertext was seen as a restraint on the contemporary digital writing scene holding back opinion and experimentation despite being the foundation of their work.

#### 4.1.2 How Publishers Define Digital Fiction

To the print publishers, digital fiction was interpreted as traditional hypertext fiction, while for the two with online presence, defining experimental digital fiction and its various strands was recognised as a difficult task. This difficulty also extends to whether digital fiction can be classified as a genre or a mode of writing: "Is digital literature a genre? I think that the mystery novel is a genre. The romance [...] is a genre. But digital literature isn't a genre today" (OP1) and "[...] interactive digital fiction will become a proper genre and probably with a better title" (OP2).

The two publishers who hailed from a purely print background did not use hypertext to refer to digital writing at all preferring 'e-book' and 'online'. The two online publishers used the term hypertext to refer to all digital fiction without constraints. Conversely from writers, publishers saw hypertext as a form that is still flourishing: "We haven't really explored PLOT and STORY properly in hypertext fiction" (OP1, emphasis is interviewee's own); "more experimental formats like hypertext fiction" (OP2).

#### 4.1.3 What Readers Understand by Digital Fiction

For print readers the overwhelming sense of digital fiction was of a story laid out as a hypertext. The influence of the conventions of webpages appears in the reader's visions of what digital fiction is ("certain words would be linked they will be blue underline" R1) and the tendency to see all digital writing as available online.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.dreamingmethods.com/waste/> [accessed 4.3.2009]

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.inanimatealice.com/> [accessed 4.3.2009]

After looking at the digital fiction examples, two of the readers expressed surprise by the idea and experience of multimedia stories: “I wouldn’t normally have considered something like this to be a sort of book, but I suppose it is” (R1) and “That to me is something slightly different from what I’ve seen before in terms of fiction so that to me becomes interesting” (R2). These readers do not seem to see the multimedia examples as hypertext.

Online readers were equally dismissive of hypertext as an effective word to describe current digital fiction as writers were: “an old school format” (OR2). OR1, who reads stories that made use of hypertext, was oblivious to the term: “I’ve written html before but hypertext fiction is new” and R2 did not consider hypertext as fiction: “I guess it is fiction because fiction is anything that is made up, written isn’t it - but it’s not my idea of fiction”.

#### 4.1.4 *Interactivity and Computer Games*

The publisher of hypertext fiction saw the term “interactive” as referring to the relation between the reader and the story as in a dialogue system: “I prefer to reserve ‘Interactive Fiction’ for work in the tradition of Eliza, Adventure and Infocom” (OP1).

Interactive is a term writers are coming to avoid as it could be used to address both the interaction between the writer and the reader (“interaction in fan-based communities” (W4) as discussed in 3.2) as well as the actions done by the reader on the user-interface: “I’ve been calling it a multimedia online fiction, I think actually we quite often call it a multimedia novel. But the word multimedia doesn’t include interactivity which it also has so ... it’s tremendously difficult” (W2). The reason for avoiding the term interactive is the lack of a clear understanding of what it means and in what circumstances it can be applied: “interactive isn’t always really the true case in a lot of the works” (W1). Uncertainty on what interactivity is emerge from readers comments while reading Joyce’s afternoon a story: “If I was going to read that I would prefer to read that in a book format where I could turn to page 52” (R1) and “With a book you turn the page. This you have to click to move on” (R2) showing no perceived difference between hypertext and books. Interactivity is clear when the reader has to do something for the story to progress, as in Inanimate Alice “[it’s] a different kind of pace” (R2). This degree of “physical” involvement of the reader moves interactivity towards the idea that stems from gaming theory (Crawford, 2005): “I’ve been coming across what is essentially a narrative but requires you to interact with it. To the degree that you are playing the game” (OP2).

Writers do not see computer games as mastering the art of storytelling but just “providing emotionally engaging narrative content” (W2). A similar opinion is shared by readers who see computer games more like a puzzle to be solved than narrative. However this distinction interactivity-games vs. storytelling-fiction is getting blurred with W2 premiering her work at “Interactive Entertainment Festival...that’s basically a games festival”. Writers and a publisher were excited about the prospect of the interactivity of games being enhanced by more effective storytelling: “I think that will probably be an area to watch” (W1), “that has no analogy in normal print I think. So I think that’s massively interesting” (OP2). If such a fusion will occur there may be a useful hybrid of terms: “narrative games” (OP2).

## 4.2 WRITING

### 4.2.1 *Changing Style and Language*

The digital format has changed the way in which a writer writes, whether this is due to the ability to “move your work physically on-screen” (W1) or the use of a screen “anything that uses a screen is absolutely in its very nature different from fiction, from fiction that is in a book. [...] It’s two completely different genres, it’s like the difference between writing fiction and writing for film” (W2).

A contrast appears in the way a writer whose experience is grounded in print narratives describes the writing process compared to a writer whose experience is grounded in design and computers. The print author remains focused on the text and the ways in which technology can enhance this: “what I’m writing is a script that’s thinking about sound and image at the same time as what text will appear on the screen” (W2). For the writer with experience in website design the writing process begins with the visual: “I see an image first even if I’m writing a more traditional piece with no digital elements. Language, I would say personally, comes after this” (W1). This contrast between the text-focus and the image-focus was carried over into the roles each positioned themselves into, with the first writer collaborating with others for the visual component and the second taking both roles of story writer and computer (interaction) designer. The writing of digital fiction as a collaborative process opens new creative paths: “writers and artists getting to grips with the possibilities of the new technologies” (W2).

The fascination with technology is seen by all authors as a potential danger for the quality of writing that instead has to be prominent: “I would [...] decide that the story would be best done like that” (W1), “I just want to write my stories” (W2), “It’s not a matter of how you can affect text with the software (the common misunderstanding) but how the text can change to utilize that software”(W3), “writers can use digital effects and multimedia to enhance their work” (W4).

Despite the core role of writing shared by all authors, there was a feeling that language and literature will be challenged and changed: “the concept of multimedia stories will influence how “literature” is written” (W1), “more adventurous multimedia writing projects that could show the real range of what text can do via language” (W4). Digital writing is still perceived as a future goal, something still to come: “[will digital writing change language?] It should do and it will do... those network aspects that always undermine authorship and the speaker” (W3), “writing in a digital format is an evolution of literary styles” (W1).

### 4.2.2 *Changing Roles*

The two male writers were more aware of the idea of storytelling on computer from the beginnings (early 1980s) and the two female writers were more interested in the community aspect of storytelling, in breaking the distance between the reader and writer established by the book: “I am interested in finding ways to allow the reader to contribute and to interact” (W2), “writing is generally a positive thing if it encourages people to express themselves” (W4). Writer 3 expresses an interest for social software and online community as a way for experimenting with digital fiction: “I want to produce an onscreen version of this to put on... the Wiki”. This is an area where forums and

websites like FanFiction.net are ahead of experimental, non-linear digital writing. Here reader and writer share the role of creator in a participative way: “the fans who become involved in fanfic communities are readers who become heavily involved in their chosen ‘universe’, and in becoming involved in the actual construction of narratives around that world, they become reader-participants” (W4). A similar enthusiasm is shown by the online readers: “[authors] are accessible. They WANT your feedback and respond sometimes even putting your ideas into the story. That is pretty cool” (OR1, emphasis is interviewee own), “Getting to talk to the people who are writing these stories is what is so great” (OR2). Discovering the possibility of interacting with the authors was an exciting perspective for print Reader 1 as well: “It’s like a whole other world - an underworld!”

### 4.2.3 *Community of Writers*

Online writing communities (forums that attract amateur writers) were the most prominent form of interaction between readers and writers, it is also this area that is fostering a community of digital writers. In online communities novice writers can improve their skills and share ideas: “forums/blogs where people can discuss writing and learn from each other” (W4), “lots of writers are honing their storytelling skills in the challenging medium of the weblog” (P1), “there will always be writers within these communities who do know what they’re doing, and who can help less able writers to become better” (W4.)

However, despite their value for exchanging ideas, communities like trAce are not seen as successful in contributing to the creation of a digital writing movement: “I don’t feel to be a part of any sort of wave. [...] I just want to write my stories” (W1). Experimentation is considered an individual issue: “sites [...] by established poets/writers [...] do things that print work couldn’t” (W4). There does not seem to be a sense of (nor interest in knowing) how many digital writers are active: “there are probably millions of writers who publish normal work digitally, but probably a lot less who do more interesting things with it” (W1).

## 4.3 Publishing

### 4.3.1 *The Readers Perspective*

Both readers and online readers saw the ability for anyone with a penchant for writing to be able to showcase their work as a good thing as it allowed readers to pick out a story that suits them. The action of weeding out good stories was seen as rewarding by Online Reader 1, “There is a lot of crap on these sites but when you find a good story it’s a gem”. A sort of community filtering process seem to exist for online fiction: “I choose what to read mainly by the number of reviews a story has” (OR2), “when [the stories] get a lot of hits, but not many reviews, they assume that people didn’t like it” (OR1). Some writing communities actually act as publishers by “selecting the best work (and some of it is very well written)” (W4).

Although limiting the range of choice, print readers appreciated the role of publishers as selectors of the best stories. Publishers are seen as a stamp of quality for their role but not necessarily distinguished from one another<sup>6</sup>: “just buy it without ever looking at who published it” (OR1), “Do many people see the role of publishing at all?” (P1). Stories placed on the Web are not perceived as published: a “published work” is a physical object that has been printed and can be bought as a book. Indeed the Web can be a good way to make a work known and actually increase the sale: “I’ve purchased the Scott Adam’s stories I’ve read online (i.e. I later bought the book)” (OR1), “reading some of these has inspired me to go out and buy the book” (W4). The Web is also the place where publishers search for new talents: “I know publishers who kind of buy the right to blogs and then put them into books” (OP2), “publishers will scan blogs and then will kind of sign up the writer” (OP1).

### 4.3.2 *The Writers Perspective*

Writers acknowledged that there is still a place for print publishers, but express frustration at the slow awakening to the possibilities of e-books and digital fiction: “I think publishers will have to eventually adapt to the possibilities like the music industry has - or is having to do” (W1), “publishers would need to see a rarefied product that could be marketed, with a paying audience willing to shell out for it” (W3). The role of publishers as promoters and showcase has not been extended to digital writing and the benefit this could bring to the development of digital fiction missed: “The best publishers offer a guarantee to the reader of some level of quality [...] and for the writer they offer that prominent shop-window. In digital writing neither of these has yet developed” (W3), “With publishers sanctioning digital work, it would become more high-profile, and probably not looked upon as print’s poor relation, which is how some people could view it” (W4). However the publishers’ reluctance to venture into digital publishing is not judged negatively by all writers: “Does it have the support of the publishing industry at the moment? I don’t think so. Is it progressing? I think it is” (W1), “in this experimental period, it’s no bad thing” (W3).

### 4.3.3 *The Publisher Perspective*

All of the publishers interviewed seemed to believe, often reluctantly, that the future of writing, publishing and reading is on screen although this is not seen as the end of the book. Although the publisher of hypertext fiction testified that “hypertext fiction has a market that is similar, in many ways, to the market for experimental literary fiction” and “successful titles sell some thousands of copies” (OP1), the general feeling was that digital fiction is an area to watch so that “it’s just not a market that is left outside” (P3), but not to invest in. Publishers believed readers still prefer a physical text.

Readers supported the publishers’ view with their interest in digital fiction dependent on their freedom to read while they “sit in an armchair or read in bed” (R3). Readers mention hand-held devices as a requirement for digital fiction to be successful while publishers mention the lack of suitable hardware as the reason for the failure of the first e-book wave. Publishers are aware that technology and new ways of

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<sup>6</sup> But for Penguin affectionately remembered by R1 as the publisher of his youth that everyone knew.

writing and distributing literature are tightly related and the parallels between the music industry's response to digital formats and the book publishing industry's seeming lack of interest in digital formats were drawn by both publishers and writers alike.

#### 4.3.4 *Making Money Digitally*

As one reader commented on reading digital fiction online: "Kind of a good idea. How do they make money out of this thing?" (R1). The digital medium may offer a freedom in the type of work writers can produce but restrictions arise from financial backing and two of the writers who were currently involved in projects available for free on the Web were aware funding would inevitably become an issue. Despite the perspective of a more economical way of publishing online than on paper, publishers struggle to see the business model that can be applied to digital literature: "you'd have to have a sort of payment mechanism, how do you decide how much to charge" (P2), "some kind of download service [...] you're going to make your money on subscriptions and people coming again and again to a website to get more of the same thing or series" (P4).

While publishers seem to just watch the evolution of digital literature, writers and readers thought that there are markets to investigate: "[books] that integrates both printed and electronic work - say, a CD in the back of a book, or stories that continue on the web after beginning in the more traditional publication" (W1), "I would like to buy the book and have the CD inside the cover - best of both worlds" (R3), "Why can't it still be both? Why can't it be dual?" (R1). For publishers, this dual method may be the way to go: "the hybrid model will definitely come into play [...] I don't think it's wholly feasible to just invest in digitised information without having any hardcopy at all" (P3).

### 4.4 Reading

#### 4.4.1 *Why Readers Read*

The focus for all of the readers was the story. The two online readers were readers of linear fiction posted on websites such as FictionPress.com and FanFiction.net. One estimated spending 15% to 20% of his reading time online (OR1), while the other did "the vast majority of [her] reading in print, but I also enjoy reading a few odd stories online" (OR2). Rather than reduce their print reading, these readers found that their overall time spent reading had increased and the type of fiction read has changed. The appeal of digital fiction was the range of material available and the freedom enjoyed by self-published material, stories not available otherwise.

The way the two online readers came to read stories online is similar. OR1 was interested in a television series that was not commissioned for a third series and trawled the web looking for a resolution to the story of the main characters, OR2 was looking for a specific storyline: "I wanted another story about it but I couldn't find anything so one day I just searched on Google and found this whole website of stories which I could search my way through".

#### 4.4.2 *Reading on Screen*

For the online readers, reading from the screen was no obstacle to enjoying fiction: "I can read ten to twelve hours easily" (OR1), "I can spend all day reading a story from the screen, no worries" (OR2). None of the print readers were averse to reading from the screen per se with everyone admitting to reading text online, be it news articles or e-mails. Two of the three readers had jobs that entailed computer based work and all would read documents from the screen. One concern with reading fiction directly from the screen was the prevalence of screen usage at work which would deter them from spending leisure time in front of a computer combined with the lack of comfort from sitting at a desk or eye strain. The idea of reading fiction from the screen thus came with the preference for short stories to be consumed at times when one is at a computer with time to spare: "at work and I am eating lunch at my desk... I could go here and read for 20 minutes" (R3).

Readers seemed attached to the idea of the book, "I like the feel of a book, the paper, seeing them on the book shelf. How do you have a collection that sits on the computer, you can't see it" (R3) and to its convenience, "I want to carry it around" (R2). Yet despite this, the idea of an audio book in mp3 format was very appealing for some.

#### 4.4.3 *Observed Reading Behaviour*

The three print readers were observed whilst reading three different digital stories (listed in 3.2). All showed a conditioned expectation of a "back button" prevalent in browsers. Their reliance on such a control was clear when they became frustrated if there was no button or similar function or if a button existed but did not perform as expected. This conditioning to the expected characteristics of a webpage continued throughout the reading of the stories online ("Where is the site map?" R2).

Only one of the readers, who declared to be not too familiar with computers, read the instructions for the hypertext before beginning to read it. The readers seemed most disorientated when reading Joyce's *Afternoon*, as there was no logic to the hyperlinks and they expected each link to be related to an anchor word.

They fared better with Campbell's *Book of Waste* using the visual map in the top corner to navigate and find out where they were in the story. Pullinger and Babel's *Inanimate Alice* was the favourite of all of the readers, maybe because it has a more linear story in respect to the other two hypertexts. Only one reader showed brief confusion over how to interact with this story and all readers were less frantic in their progression through it.

##### 4.4.3.1 *Expectations and Reader Control*

A common idea of digital writing centres around the issue of control. Readers mentioned that they thought the premise of hypertext fiction (the reader picks their way through a story) was giving the reader too much control. When facing the plain hypertext story, they commented on the inability to control the pace or to know the structure of the work ("how many chapters and how many pages you're got" R2). Similarly, when *Inanimate Alice* displayed subsequent pages of text on the screen at its own speed, the readers were frustrated that they

were not given the freedom to read at their own pace. With a book, a reader can jump forward to any page they like, they can read the ending first and finish with the beginning: they expect digital fiction to provide the same control over the reading rhythm.

#### 4.4.3.2 *Too Few Words to Remember*

All the readers concurred that the short bursts of text so prevalent in all of shown stories were unappealing to readers accustomed to a printed book with three hundred plus words per page and two pages before one has to actively turn a page. All readers expressed interest in the stories being told but the frequency of action led them to form negative opinions about the story as a whole: "It's fiction for someone with a very short attention span" (R3).

Readers felt the short snatches of text (even less than 10 words a page) made them more uncomfortable with the branching narrative: "I would like to have a bit of a story before I split off" (R2), "it doesn't really flow as a book as a story" (R3). The fragmentary nature of the hypertext and the cognitive effort required detracted from the story and reduced the enjoyment, "It's a mental activity" (R2). The 'disjointed' pieces of text meant there were pressures on the readers' memories if they wanted (as they did) to "understand how all of it works" (R1).

#### 4.4.4 *Hypertext: Narrative Without Shape*

By admission, two of the readers interviewed skim read parts of print stories but readers felt uncomfortable if the full text was not visible to them as is the case with hypertext stories. They attributed their feeling of discomfort to the lack of clear boundaries that they are used to in books. A book gives the reader the full control over the reading process (how much left to read, what to read first), a control that is missing with hypertext: "Not knowing where you could or couldn't go or what is or isn't in there is just uncomfortable as a natural phenomenon anyway. You like to know what you don't know" (R2).

Readers moved around in the narrative until they had a physical sense of the size of the story and preferred when a map was provided. When no indication of the story structure and length is given, the readers felt they had to read the whole text to ensure they get the whole story; but on a hypertext "[the reader has] to go iteratively over every section and every link to find out what happened in every scenario. It would be very very repetitive" (R3).

The concept of non-linearity or branching narratives was not what readers objected to. It was more that they could not see a path, that they do not know "what the other option is": "I like to know the entirety to know that yes I would be happy to just be reading that bit" (R2). As a consequence they felt they had to concentrate more on the decision making than the story: "Why can't I just start at the beginning? Why do I have to choose?" (R1), "It's more about what's clickable and what's not on ... it becomes more like a game [...] than 'I want to read a story'" (R2).

#### 4.4.5 *Creativity and Controlling Meaning*

The pleasure of reading seems to come from following a story that readers have no control over: "what I usually want from a book [is] to find out what happens next" (R3), "I don't know whether he dies or lives. I want to be told that" (R2). Readers liked the freedom to embellish, but did not like the idea of being a creative force in the overall story being told. They see their creative role as limited to imagining events related to the story: "I think the reader is quite passive actually. [Pause] There again it makes you think, a good book. So then you could say it's creative because you carry on thinking about it and what could have happened next or what happened before the book started. But essentially no. You are reading someone else's creation. That's what you are paying for. Someone else's creative thoughts" (R3).

Digital fiction that conforms to this principle seems to be more appreciated: readers enjoyed Pullinger's text the best as it pulled them along through the story ("It at least held my interest and I wanted to find out what happened" R3) rather than Joyce's one where they have to figure out the story ("I'm more interested in seeing how it all fits together rather than reading." R2).

However this could be due to these readers being new to the idea of interacting with the narrative: "It's moving into a different realm, blurring the lines between a book and a movie ... [In the digital text] you're told when to be scared by this very music, whereas you might not have been scared in the book" (R2). The fact that readers did not feel like fitting the creative role designed for them by digital writers does not mean they are unwilling to change their habits, more that they were unaware of their habits: "This interview has shown how set in my ways I am" (R3).

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The result of this research shows that digital writing is still in its infancy and as such there is turmoil in the terminology which will not settle until a comfortable style has been established. The difficulty and fluidity of vocabulary lies in finding terms that encompasses the ethos of hypertext but also expresses the new experiments in digital writing as more "sophisticated" (W3) than simple hypertext narratives. The term 'hypertext' itself is seen as a chain linking digital fiction to a specific instance of digital writing considered now "old school" (W1, OR2). Although publishers do not seem to have the same reservation in using the term 'hypertext', they share the view that digital fiction has not "really explored PLOT and STORY" (OP1) and there is room for "more experimental formats" (OP2). The interplay of multi-linear text, reader's involvement and multimedia seem to emerge as the core of digital fiction. Interviewees showed much excitement about the prospect of computer games incorporating more effective storytelling and readers showed greater engagement with *Inanimate Alice* that required them to perform specific actions for the story to proceed than they did with other more passive digital stories.

The term 'interaction' is gaining a new sense, that of readers interacting with authors in writing communities. While the interviewed readers found this idea particularly attractive, writers, despite their interest, considered communities as the domain of amateurs and recognize much of the professional work is being done in pockets. This could explain the lack among authors of a cohesive feeling of



digital writing as a movement. The group who have recognized that blogs and online writing communities offer an area for emerging talents to experiment with creative writing are the publishers. However the role of publishers in the digital literature realm is still that of an observer, ready to contract the best talents or put in print work that proved successful online. Therefore the claim by writers that publishers are behind the times is not unfounded. Only in the last two years the websites of the top five book publishers<sup>7</sup> started selling audio books and more recently e-books<sup>8</sup>. While prominent paper publishers were late in recognizing the sweeping trend of downloading stories, other actors have entered the scene: Mobipocket.com, an Amazon.com company funded in 2000, offers more than 40,000 ebooks to be read on mobile devices while Audible.co.uk, the UK branch of a US company launched in June 2005, has 30,000 audio titles to attract a UK estimating market of \$70million (Nugent, 2006).

It seems publishers recognized the advantage of offering digital downloadable content toward the end of 2007 when a iRex and Amazon released their *reader*, a sort of slim tablet computer specifically designed for reading: iRex Iliad<sup>9</sup>, Amazon Kindle<sup>10</sup>. Amazon took the business a step further providing for downloading also emagazines, newspapers and other written content like blogs. The technology seemed mature enough. Andrew Marr, well known UK journalist and a “bibliophile, or perhaps bibliomaniac” (Marr, 2007), used iRex Iliad for a month for reading ebooks: “For me, the most important moment came reading a Sherlock Holmes story when I suddenly realised I'd been following the tale for several minutes having completely forgotten about the Iliad itself” (Marr, 2007). Since then new business initiative started: in September 2008 Waterstone, one of the most prominent UK bookseller, partnered with Sony for the retailing of the Sony Reader and the selling of thousands of ebooks; in February 2009 Amazon announced the release of Kindle ebook applications for iPhone/iPod devices. The world of ebooks seem to have started to move very quickly: the next step is to consider actual user needs, e.g. the preference for wireless enabled readers respect to ones that need a PC (Flood, 2008); provides a smooth interaction (Belopotosky, 2009) or providers that offer content “auto-delivered wirelessly on your Kindle” (from Amazon Kindle Store website). The price police should also change as the cost of an ebook is comparable to that of a printed copy even though the publisher is saving on paper and the (human) reader is burdened with the additional cost of the device (Flood, 2008).

Despite the apparent novelty, this new market is still rooted in the traditional process of print publishing: what changes is the media, not the mode. However the availability of hardware and software for mobile reading opens new possibilities for publishers, writers and readers alike. The study showed online readers were excited by the prospect of the range of fiction online but also used reader's ratings to decide what they read. This highlights an interesting paradox: the ability for every story to find a reader yet readers still flock to an elite range of stories. Montford suggests interactive fiction communities should resist commercialisation expressing the independent nature of interactive fiction (Montford, 2005). Still this does not preclude the idea of publishers offering professionally e-published titles of the more popular digital fictions staying out of the creative and filtering side of the communities.

Although in this way digital fiction could reach more readers, the potential of using the digital medium in creative writing is not achieved. As Nick Hampshire, a digital publishing analyst explains “Sony and iRex see content as being key to the market” and are investing in a “specialist content delivery service that is optimised for their reader” (Kelly, 2006). This is an area where digital writing may find a home: “The possibilities of being able to create a book that includes audio components, that includes moving image components, that includes interactive components” (Hampshire in (Kelly, 2006)) has the potential to generate “a whole new breed of author. New skills, new content, new ideas, new ways of thinking” (Hampshire in (Kelly, 2006)).

Besides new ways of publishing, digital fiction has to find new ways of user interaction and control. Cognitive overload and disorientation have long been recognized as problems for hypertext users (Conklin, 1987) and various strategies to help navigation have been proposed (Montford, 2005). The aid of a visual map was successful in helping hypertext fiction (Densecombe, 1998) to find “an abstract shape that could act as a schematic guide” (Douglas, 1993b) reinforcing the idea of the reader's sense of hypertext as shapeless, or without boundary.

One of the problems with no determinate ending is that there is an inability to get the whole story. Hypertext fiction places the burden of ordering thoughts and ideas cohesively on the reader that can take the pleasure out of reading as the readers involved in this study discovered. Readers were equally uncomfortable with the story directing the rhythm of reading (i.e. displaying consequent screens of text without any user intervention) and the inability to know what is there and control what to skip. When talking about an endless, shapeless hypertext narrative the readers talked about boundaries and missing meanings. The book can be considered a technology to look at for the clues its physicality gives to the reader (Douglas, 2001; Duguid, 1996). Pullinger's story *Inanimate Alice* stood out as the reader's unanimous favourite: it stated it would take 5 minutes to read, provided feedback as the story developed by displaying a list of clickable icons (each image corresponding to the story snippet content) thus allowing the reader to move about. The medium is perhaps not the sole message but it has an undeniable influence on what we read, how we read and the meaning we take from the experience. Designers of digital fiction have to carefully consider how readers read books and what they want to control on a screen displayed story; they have to provide the right tools at the interface for the experience to be enjoyable.

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<sup>7</sup> The top five publishers identified by Publishers Weekly in 2002 are: Random House, Penguin Putnam, Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins and Time Warner (Maryles, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> A check of the five top publishers websites done May 2007 showed only HarperCollins linked to an audiobook download service (audible.co.uk); Simon&Schuster and TimeWarner listed some titles as available for downloading; and Random House and Penguin Putnam offered audio books on CD or cassettes only. In May 2007 Penguin was the only one to offer a range of about 130 classics as e-books. Two years after, in March 2009 all five sell ebooks and audiobooks, downloadable from their websites.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.irextechnologies.com/products/iliad> [Accessed 4.3.2009]

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/kindle-store-ebooks-newspapers-blogs/b/ref=topnav\\_storetab\\_kinc?ie=UTF8&node=133141011](http://www.amazon.com/kindle-store-ebooks-newspapers-blogs/b/ref=topnav_storetab_kinc?ie=UTF8&node=133141011)

Interviewed readers were also uncomfortable with considering reading, and hence themselves, as a creative force within the story. Creativity is seen as producing tangible output thus positioning writing as the creative activity whereas reading is in the complementary passive role (Glasner, 2004). This could also explain why readers feel uncomfortable with the hypertext forcing them to direct the story, when in essence it removed their control. In a hypertext narrative, the author has more control over where the reader goes next (Aarseth, 1997)). Skim reading is a power that readers possess and can be tampered with by hypertext narratives or interface tools to control how much the reader can see. The most effective digital fiction can change readers' views as to their role in the creative process by working with the conventions that make readers feel comfortable, namely absorbing the reader into the story and providing a sense of the story as a whole.

To conclude, although digital fiction is still unsettled as a genre, the technology to take it to the wide public is available and readers are equally ready to experience new forms of narrative. Writers have the chance to experiment even more with the new medium but should also start to consider what the reader experience actually is besides their intent of co-creating. Publishers should stop staying still and watch, but take the lead into this exciting digital realm that is potentially very lucrative.

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## 8. APPENDIX – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### 8.1 Writers

#### Defining Digital Fiction

What words would you use to describe the digital writing you do?

*There is a range of terminology that has been applied*

*Examples: hypertext, interactive, hypermedia, kinetic*

How would you define digital fiction?

*Do you consider e-books or sites such as FictionPress.com to be forms of digital writing?*

*Are computer games digital fiction?*

How long have you been writing digital fiction?

*What styles of digital fiction have you experimented with?*

#### Writing

Has the digital medium changed the way you write?

*How do ideas arrive – image or language?*

*Do you find you use different language / styles in writing for a digital medium?*

Do you do all of the designing yourself?

*Do you consider yourself to be a writer (/author/storyteller) or a graphic designer (/programmer) or something else?*

*Which came first – the skill of narrative or the skill of digital construction?*

Do you think digital writing will change the role of the writer?

*Collaboration, merging with readers, designers.*

There are suggestions that digital fiction is a natural step in the evolution of literary styles. Do you agree?

*It does seem that a definite thread can be seen traced from modernism, postmodernism, digital (fractured, non-linear, death of the author, popular culture in its format, stream of consciousness, multimedia, web of ideas)*

Do you think digital fiction will ever be more than a niche of writing?

*Is digital writing a style of writing?*

*Will it become the mainstream?*

#### Publishing

Where does digital writing leave the role of the publisher?

A lot of digital fiction is available for free on the internet. How is digital fiction funded?

*Do you think the publishing world could be usurped just like the music industry was with mp3s?*

How would you like to see digital writing progress?

*Probes: can it progress without publishers helping?*

#### Reading

Do you think there will come a time when people read fiction/poetry from a screen more than from a book?

Does digital fiction change the role of the reader?

*Interactivity, collaboration with author.*

Do you read digital fiction in your spare time?

### 8.2 Publishers

#### Defining Digital Fiction

What do you understand by the term digital fiction?

Do you think digital fiction will ever be more than a niche of writing?

*Will it become the mainstream?*

There are suggestions that digital fiction is a natural step in the evolution of literary styles. Do you agree?  
*It does seem that a definite thread can be seen traced from modernism, postmodernism, digital (fractured, non-linear, death of the author, popular culture in its format, stream of consciousness, multimedia, web of ideas)*

### **Publishing**

Do you publish digital fiction? / Are you aware of any publishers that publish digital fiction?

Much of the digital writing now available can be read online for free. What would be your response to this trend as a publisher?

Do you think there is a market for digital fiction?

Do you think the publishing world is in danger of being usurped just like the music industry was with mp3s?  
Audio books – mp3s vs CDs

How different is [would] publishing a digital story to publishing a traditional print story?  
*Editors? Publishing costs less?*

Where does digital writing leave the role of the publisher?

### **Reading**

Do you think there will come a time when people read fiction/poetry from a screen more than from a book?

Does digital fiction change the role of the reader?  
Interactivity, collaboration with author

Have you ever read digital fiction?

## **8.3 Readers**

### **Opening**

~~~ Print Readers only ~~~

What sort of fiction do you like to read?

*Genre? Length? How do you choose what to read?*

Have you ever read any fiction on computer?

~~~~~

~~ Online Readers only ~~~

What sort of digital fiction do like you read?

*Have you ever read: hypertext, interactive, multimedia?*

How did you discover digital fiction?

~~~~~

### **Defining Digital Fiction**

What do you understand by the term digital fiction?

*Hypertext, interactive.*

Do you think computer games are digital fiction?

### **Reading**

Do you think the reader is creative?

Why do you read fiction?

*What do you enjoy about it? What do you get out of it?*

How do you read fiction?

*Do you often skim over certain passages?*

*Do you find yourself flicking back to earlier pages?*

What do you think reading a digital story would be like?

*Same as a print, multimedia, disjointed, uncomfortable, exciting*

What do you think about reading a story from the screen?

*Do you read anything from the screen?*

~~~ Print Reader only ~~~

I'm going to show you three different types of digital fiction.

*Reader is shown the three digital fictions*

*Help is given when directly asked for by the reader*

What did you think of each of those stories?

Which one did you prefer?

Has this changed your view of digital fiction?

*Are you likely to read digital fiction again?*

Do you think the future of reading is on screen?

~~~~

~~~~ Online Readers only ~~~

Do you read digital fiction differently to print fiction?

How much of the fiction you read is on screen?

What do you like about reading digital fiction?

*Compared to print fiction? Freedom? Control? Community?*

Do you think the future of reading is on screen?

~~~~

### **Publishing and writing**

When you are reading a printed book are you aware of who the publisher is?

Do you think about the author when you read a book?