

A Study of Publisher, Writer and Reader: Different Perspectives on Digital Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study set up to investigate and map the landscape of digital writing today. Writers, readers and publishers have been interviewed and questioned for their opinions on different issues. Results show the area is still unsettled though much excitement surrounds experimentations and freedom of publishing online. Publishers are not yet involved in digital writing and this is seen simultaneously as a blessing and a curse. All interviewees agree that digital fiction will come, likely prompted by new reading technology.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.4 [Hypertext/Hypermedia]: *navigation, user issues*. A.0 [General]: *general literary works (e.g. fiction, plays)*.

General Terms

Human Factors.

Keywords

Digital fiction, qualitative study, reading, writing, publishing.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study in this paper was set out to understand why after 20 years of creative writing digital fiction is still a niche phenomenon. A bottom-up approach is adopted 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 books) were also asked to try some digital stories, their reaction was observed and their opinion recorded.

2. THE STUDY

Little research has been done on the writing and reading of digital fiction and the focus has been on quantitative data to garner a broad overview of who and how readers are using electronic texts [4, 6]. This study complements both these quantitative results with a qualitative, in-depth perspective.

Four (4) writers (W1-4), 2 print publishers (P1-2), 2 online publishers (OP1-2), 3 print-readers (R1-3) and 2 online-readers (OR1-2) were interviewed; the three (3) print-readers were also observed whilst reading digital fiction for the first time and questioned on this experience.

Four different semi-structured interviews were used, each tuned on the interviewee's group, but sharing the same general schema: i) defining digital fiction and other related terms, e.g. hypertext, interactivity; ii) question the interviewee's role in depth; iii) interviewee's opinion on the other two roles.

Interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and were conducted in July and August 2006.

The three print readers were observed while reading a pre-selected range of digital fiction:

- Michael Joyce's *Afternoon, a story* (1987) [5]: a plain-text hypertext story without a navigational map;
- *Book of Waste* (2006) from Andy Campbell¹: a hypertext with graphics and a visual map of the structure;
- *Inanimate Alice* (2006) by Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph²: a linear story that uses graphics and music requiring the reader to complete certain tasks to move the narrative along.

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. This provided objective evidence that complemented the subjective view expressed in the interview. Readers were also shown the FictionPress.com website where they browsed the author pages and range of stories available.

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 the topic they mapped best, disregarding where the comment was in the interview flow; those that fit more than one topic were duplicated.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Terminology foundation

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 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

¹ <http://www.dreamingmethods.com/waste/> [accessed 2.5.2007]

² <http://www.inanimatealice.com/> [accessed 2.5.2007]

publishers do not seem to have the same reservation in using the term ‘hypertext’, they share the view that digital fiction has not exploited its potential yet.

3.2 Merging storytelling and games

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 stories.

3.3 Writing community

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.

3.4 Publishing digital

Part of the indolence of print publishers is due to the readers’ attitude: a physical published text is recognised as a sign of an official, quality text. Print is spoken of by the writers, publishers and readers as being not simply the forerunner to digital information but as the baseline with words such as “traditional” (W2), “normal” (W1), “proper” (P1). This legitimisation of a text by publication is linked to the idea of the value of a text as an object. As more experimental digital writing cannot be conceptualised as a physical object, it is unlikely to ever be accepted. However the interviewed writers recognized the benefit the cohesion a digital publisher could provide to the professionals when trying to reach a broader audience. The bridge between divisive digital formats and cohesive retail outlets seems to be coming from hardware producers just as mp3 and iPod changed the music landscape forever.

Publishers need to re-consider their position to avoid being usurped like the music industry has been by mp3s. They are already missing out on a potential new market as they could offer a wider range of titles without incurring high costs. Strategies for selecting the best work come from the writers’ communities’ dynamic. The online readers were excited by the prospect of the range of fiction online but also used reader’s ratings to decide what they read.

3.5 Interaction, control and the sense of story

Digital fiction has to find new ways of user interaction and control. The aid of a visual map was successful in helping hypertext fiction [1] to find “an abstract shape that could act as a

schematic guide” [2] 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. Pullinger’s story stood out as the reader’s unanimous favourite because of the feedback and control it provided to the reader. 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.

Interviewed readers were 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 [3]. 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.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Thirteen among writers, readers and publishers have been interviewed for this study aiming at mapping digital fiction. It emerges that digital fiction is still in an experimental phase with an unsettled terminology and several writing genres in evolution. Readers enjoy reading stories and seem uncomfortable with a more active role. The position of publishers is that of observing with interest but not participating yet. The number of people involved in the study is limited: the Reading Room at HT 2007 will give us the opportunity to expand the sample and provide a more detailed picture of the digital fiction realm.

5. REFERENCES

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