

Masthead Logo

Via Sapientiae:

The Institutional Repository at DePaul University

College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences Theses
and Dissertations

College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

8-2013

New media objects: the future of electronic literature and its influence on print stylistics

Brian Tillewein

DePaul University, briantillewein@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Tillewein, Brian, "New media objects: the future of electronic literature and its influence on print stylistics" (2013). *College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences Theses and Dissertations*. 148.
<https://via.library.depaul.edu/etd/148>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsulliv6@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.

*New Media Objects: The Future of Electronic Literature and Its Influence on Print
Stylistics*

A Thesis

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

August, 2013

BY

Brian Tillewein

Department of English
College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
DePaul University
Chicago, Illinois

New Media Objects: The Future of Electronic Literature and Its Influence on Print Stylistics

Brian Tillewein

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of digital text the field of English has found itself pushed into unfamiliar territory. Close readings of minimally changing text had been for centuries the default practice of the profession. But with the rise of the web over the last two decades, the discipline can no longer maintain focus exclusively on unchanging models of print which appear ever more dated under the pressure of digital technologies and new media. Instead we must be willing to engage, assess, and acknowledge this new moment in literature by seeking to gain perspective on electronic literature, being particularly sensitive of the influence of this new media on traditional print texts. In this thesis, I will examine several digital and print texts that to me exemplify the tension between print and new media in order to determine the unique factors that allow each kind of work to succeed as literature.

The future of narrative is shifting, and it is anyone's guess in which directions it will evolve. N. Katherine Hayles has perhaps the most accurate assessment on the future impact of this digital landscape on literature when she writes that "books will not

disappear, but neither will they escape the effects of the digital technologies that interpenetrate them. More than a mode of material production, digitality has become the textual condition of the twenty-first-century literature.”¹ This is a very astute observation that bears serious consideration moving forward in literary studies. The progress of digital technologies cannot be retracted, and regardless of shift, be it detrimental or otherwise to the traditional sense of narrative, the book will continue to exist as a medium within the technological landscape. It is not a question of if these continuing developments will affect the traditional notions of discourse and narrative prose within the novel, but a matter of to what extent. In the coming decades the novel may be facing the most critical and challenging times in its history. Two methods of analysis can help us gain a deeper understanding of the stakes in redefining the book, and both will be employed in what follows: rigorous academic research accompanied by close reading, and the proper application of media specific concepts to demonstrate the nature of this media shift in literature.

Initially it can be helpful to think of electronic literature as a continuation of experimental print literature. Indeed this is how many of the first accounts of e-lit described it in the late 1980s and 1990s. Roland Barthes, it seemed, anticipated the emergence of hypertext in the late 1960s and early 1970s when he described “text,” as for example famously in *S/Z*: “in this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by

¹ Hayles, Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2008. Print. pg. 186

several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one.”²

S/Z is often given credit for being among the first examples in print literature to describe the plurality of paths possible in interacting with narrative content. In “The Death of the Author,” two years earlier, Barthes similarly declared that the meaning of a text lies in its destination, and that textuality by its public nature as a shared language mingles writing and reading, writer and reader. Extending the Barthesian insight, we could say that both new media objects and traditional prose (when treated as “text” rather than an organic “work”) exhibit the desire to challenge accepted notions of the reader/author relationship, page layout, and narrative technique. However, before undergoing an analysis it is critical to determine a framework of characteristics from which one can make determinations concerning the effectiveness of the texts in both mediums. When analyzing the effectiveness of a medium the concept of electronic literature must first be defined in order to provide the reader the proper insight into the analytical situation. For my definition I build upon Hayles, who defines electronic literature as “a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer”³. Hayles also uses the term “born digital” equivalently for this concept, and I will too. A work that is born digital is any text first created as an electronic file with the use of a computer. While this describes many books and virtually all written documents in today's market, this essay will narrow its focus to one species of digital object, namely, those *meant to be read on a computer*. This effects not only the reader's relation to the text, but also the reader's receptiveness to traditional print objects. Within this context,

² Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York), pg. 5-6

³ Hayles, Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2008. Print. pg. 3

literature retains its traditional appeal to English pedagogy but gains from being equally suited to the concepts of new media study.

Another particularly useful term for comparing new media or electronic texts with print works is the concept of remediation. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin explain this idea as “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms.”⁴ Bolter and Grusin argue that remediation works as an ever-changing and oscillating “double logic” of two dynamics: immediacy and hypermediacy. According to Bolter and Grusin immediacy refers to the style of representation where the goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium; for example, in considering the idea of immediacy in recent years it is helpful to associate it with the promises of virtual reality. Virtual reality serves as a medium that seeks to disappear from the user’s awareness, promising “transparent, perceptual immediacy, [and] experience without mediation” (Bolter and Grusin 23). When one interacts with virtual reality one becomes immersed in the digital environment ideally to the point where one forgets about the actual machine initiating the sense of altered immersive reality. It might be pointed out that this phenomenon is not new with contemporary new media. When one is absorbed into a print book the reading interface can temporarily recede from consciousness to a marked degree, making even low-tech reading sometimes “immediate” in Bolter and Grusin’s terms. Hypermediacy functions in the opposite manner, seeking to remind the viewer of mediation and media as such, and a great way to think of how and when one encounters hypermediacy in the current media landscape is to consider the average

⁴ Bolter, J. David, and Richard A. Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000. Print.pg. 273

desktop interface or web page. Bolter and Grusin quote William J. Mitchell to help explain a type of visual style that “privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object.”⁵ Ideas of fragmentation and heterogeneity become clearer when considering the typical web page. The web itself is a form of fragmentation when one considers that a user can utilize many web pages for different things (Instagram for photos, Pandora for music, YouTube for videos) but also a few web pages for many things (Google, Bing). Companies have invested in browser platforms--Internet Explorer, Chrome, Firefox, Mozilla, and the like, in order to create a more robust and multimodal user experience through the strategically filtered use of hypermediacy. By such standardization and filtering the user is misled into thinking that all web pages have relatively the same layout and function because of the consistent manner through which they arrive there (i.e. the hyperlink or the facebook or tumblr front page). This concept of remediation and its two strategies for achieving it form a cornerstone of new media theory. When applied to media objects they foster a vivid understanding of the feeling of engagement a reader can experience with an electronic text.

The essay will address not only the influence that new media literature shows over printed works, but also the manner in which new media continuously remediates the traditional aesthetics of written discourse. Given the scope of this research, it will also be necessary to define several essential concepts for interpreting print literature. These characteristics can then be applied to electronic text in order to determine its

⁵ Bolter, J. David, and Richard A. Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000. Print.pg. 31

retention of historically print-based techniques. One of the major features of the works I will discuss is heteroglossia. In his famous essay "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin saw internal differentiation as a prerequisite of novelistic prose. With the emergence of the novel in modernity he saw evidence of the internal stratification of language, of social heteroglossia, and a variety of individual voices simultaneously woven into text. Bakhtin argued that "heterogeneous stylistic unities, upon entering the novel, combine to form a structured artistic system, and are subordinated to the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole, a unity that cannot be identified with any single one of the unities subordinated to it" (484). Language, in other words, is a medley of different kinds of speech and reference, and all elements of it have the socio-economic residue in their formation and continuance. Bakhtin is concerned with the way all the linguistic elements we associate with speech combine within the written word to form the concept of the novel. Bakhtin believes that novelistic language can be defined as "a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (484). More simply put, he considers the novel form to be the combination of societal influences in combination with an individual's own belief system. At the same time, narrative for Bakhtin has two distinguishing stylistic features: the inclusion of distinctive links among different sociolects and interrelationships of class and status. These concepts are critical to understanding narration in traditional literature, and when applied to electronic literature will also give us a pathway for analysis and proper identification of the narrative styles being explored.

Given the increasing prominence of electronic literature within the last couple of decades, it is easy to find oneself under the false pretense of attributing this concept of interactivity strictly to modern electronic works. But the book, and literature particularly, has a long history of seeking to interact with readers. At the same time while electronic media has been credited with heralding unprecedented opportunity for establishing an interactive environment, it is sometimes limited by its own capabilities. In a 2005 essay provocatively entitled "How Interactive Can Fiction Be?" Michel Chaouli describes how this opportunity manifests itself within one sub-genre of electronic literature, hyperfiction. This particular genre makes use of this popular method of seeking to establish a connection with the reader through the inclusion of a fairly common internet component known as the hyperlink. The hyperlink is readily identifiable to any user that has had even the most basic of internet experience, and is often used in electronic literature, hyperfiction particularly, to navigate their users through the object. Most electronic objects will offer the user at least the option of two to three hyperlinks per page hoping to generate an increased sense of interactivity. However while the intention of these links is to provide the user seamless access to the object it in fact can create a sense of overstimulation within the user. Chaouli argues that a real limitation of electronic literature is that it has the potential to over stimulate its reader, noting "not only aesthetic pleasure but critical engagement, too, paradoxically depends on shutting down the return channel of communication."⁶ Users can in fact find themselves distracted by the unexpected narrative freedom given to them by a hyperlinked electronic object. What role, in such cases, with such clickable and unclickable options,

⁶ Chaouli, Michel. "How Interactive Can Fiction Be?" *Critical Inquiry* 31.3 (2005): 599-617, 608.

does one give to authorial intent? What role to the reader's own more and less knowable motives and biases? Suddenly the user is presented with what seems to be an infinite number of reading scenarios for engaging the narrative. Do they read until the most enticing hyperlink on the page? Do they simply always go with the first option available? Perhaps always the last? The user becomes forced to contemplate the options based on their availability, and this extra stress on the user in turn makes the experience more about getting through the object than developing a hermeneutic relationship with in. Ultimately Chaouli concludes that "paradoxically, a hypertext, precisely by offering some choices (but not others), has a way of making the limits of the space it encompasses even more readily visible than does the 'hierarchical and authoritarian' text produced by the printed press."⁷ Chaouli is correct in making this distinction, which I would contend, bears a direct relation to the medium through which one experiences the authorial intent of an object. The user often becomes more quickly aware of the limitations of an electronic object in part because of the constrained medium through which he or she experiences it, for instance the computer screen. The computer has the societal reputation of being a boundless machine of infinite capabilities, but for the most part when interacting even with born digital new media objects one's activities are only few in number such as scrolling, clicking, and reading. Paradoxically, a user of literature in an electronic state can become more concerned with the narrative's 'white' spaces than a user engaged with traditional print.

⁷ "How Interactive," 612.

It is also important to point out that one need not wait until the advent of electronic literature to encounter critics engaged in discussions of “interactive” literature. Indeed, for many theorists reading has always been a highly interactive process. Foremost among these, Wolfgang Iser’s analysis of reading has particular implications for the study of new media. Iser belongs to a school of thought within the literary community known as the “Konstanz School” of reception theory, and argues that reading is an interactive experience. This makes Iser particularly important when studying the ways digital literature affects the reading experience because until recently this interactive process had not changed for centuries -- one opened a book, usually turned the pages in sequence, and imagined under authorial instructions (to paraphrase Elaine Scarry).⁸ In “The Implied Reader,” Iser discusses the ways the novel has progressed as a form in modern history. He illustrates how the eighteenth century novel prided itself on the idea of reader-author connection while over the nineteenth century the novel became more experimental, associating itself with different perspectives and seeking to “activate the reader”. For instance during the 18th century much of the writing in novels sought to establish an emotional connection with its reader and is reflected in the popularity of the sentimental and gothic genres during this period. In the 19th century, the novel often sought to engage the reader and make him or her a political subject, activating him or her on an emotional level as for instance in the popularity of anti-slavery and prohibitionist genres. Finally, in the 20th century, Iser explains, the novel came to be characterized by less intrusive authorial didacticism, making the reader decide ethical issues largely on his or her own. Iser writes: “The reader of modern novels is deprived

⁸ *Dreaming By the Book*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

of the assistance which the eighteenth-century writer had given him"⁹. This acknowledgement by Iser that modernity is moving towards more reader-oriented narratives also displays another trait associated within the modern novel and electronic literature--the seeming weakening of the hold of authorial address in narratives.

Lev Manovich joins Iser in the effort to detail the shift of narrative address within the novel by noting that alongside these changes to style, the very medium through which the object is experienced has shifted. Manovich details the shifting nature in the way we experience a medium by focusing on an essential element of representation, the screen. Manovich reminds us of the long-term history of screen-like interfaces: "If computers have become a common presence in our culture in only the last decade, the screen, on the other hand, has been used to present visual information for centuries."¹⁰ Manovich uses the concept of the screen to record the shifting way a user experiences a medium, categorizing media representations as being either objects of the "classical" screen or the "dynamic" screen. According to Manovich, a classical screen is "intended for frontal viewing--as opposed to a panorama for instance. It exists in our normal space ... and acts as a window into another space."¹¹ In the history of culture, media such as paintings, pages of books, and two-dimensional pictures can be likened to classical screens. The dynamic screen, on the other hand, "retains all the properties of a classical screen while adding something new. It can display an image changing over

⁹ Iser, Wolfgang. "The Implied Reader." In *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*. Ed. Dorothy J. Hale. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006. Page range of essay, 764.

¹⁰ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, 94. See also Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

¹¹ *Language of New Media*, 95.

time.”¹² Film projection, photography, television, and virtually all digital media since the mid-twentieth century can be grouped here. Becoming familiar with this distinction of classic and dynamic screen, one is better able to see various significant features of one’s interaction with literary objects, print or electronic.

RECONSTRUCTING MAYAKOVSKY

To start exploring these concepts in practical terms, I turn to a recent electronic work: Illya Szilak’s *Reconstructing Mayakovsky*. *Reconstructing Mayakovsky*¹³ was produced in 2008 and is described by the author as “inspired by the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky who killed himself in 1930 at the age of thirty-six. This hybrid media novel imagines a dystopia where uncertainty and discord have been eliminated through technology.” I will show in this section why this work serves as an excellent example of how electronic literature can incorporate both new media concepts and traditional print characteristics with minimal tension between forms.

An immediate sensation of freedom arises when encountering this work for the first time. *Reconstructing Mayakovsky* begins by plunging the reader into a title screen resembling a galaxy, with ‘topics’ strewn across its vast cosmic reaches. In progressing through the narrative, reading particular screens at seemingly any order, the user is provided more freedom to interact within the object than in typical print works. The manner through which the user fulfills his/her role as reader is entirely open ended; he or she can progress through the object in a linear fashion (selecting links in the order

¹² Ibid., 96.

¹³ <http://www.reconstructingmayakovsky.com/>

they are presented), or by random sequencing (choosing the links that the user feels most drawn to or interested in), all in the effort to try to create some aspect of narrative coherence. This free form of user access in which no definitive instruction, or pathway, is given precedence by the author (on one level) is a trademark element of many New Media objects. As Michel Chaouli describes such works, echoing Barthes, there is “no canonical order. Every path defines an equally convincing and appropriate reading.”¹⁴ Like the bright blue links (hyperlinks) a web user is familiar with as a method of navigation from site to site, hypertexts take advantage of the ability to link information to create a narrative matrix which ideally allows the user to interact with the object on a unique and personal level. This hypertextual element to Szilak’s work not only promotes multiple readings, it also serves to progress the narrative through reader interaction, pushing authorial control to the background. The object’s diminished reliance on the author’s intent to convey one particular meaning leads to an open ended and interesting experience for the user.

And yet, after the initial sense of expanse, the limitations of this brand of interactivity begin to appear. The reader/user of *Reconstructing Mayakovsky* has limited control over the vantage point with which they encounter the topics floating in space: “Manifesto”, “Mechanisms”, “Movies”, “Audio Podcasts” and the like. (It might be noted as well that several of these choices bring one only to other static or scrollable print pages, themselves barely “interactive.”) These topics float within the galaxy, serving as information points with which the user can interact in a limited fashion, and it is through

¹⁴ “How Interactive,” 603.

this interaction that the user is able to move the narrative forward. Also apparent is the sense of disconnect that Chaouli predicted when he argues that “increased interactivity entails diminished freedom while reading.”¹⁵ The largest drawback of *Reconstructing Mayakovsky*, and electronic literature in its current state, is its inability to successfully combine the mental processes associated with reading with the technology available. This sense of diminished freedom that Chaouli is describing is associated strictly with the reading act. For while the text may provide the reader many options for navigating the narrative, the need to process these options puts a strain on the reader’s ongoing hermeneutic process that is not present when reading a work of stable print. Under these conditions, Chaouli’s research lends itself to my claim that this added stress on brain function experienced by a user/reader when interacting with an electronic object is enough to distract the reader from seeking to understand the work in an aesthetic and meaningful manner.

After repeated engagement, it becomes apparent that Szilak’s *Reconstructing Mayakovsky* embodies what Bolter and Grusin determine to be the two forms through which remediation is achieved: immediacy and hypermediacy. Immediacy, one will recall, is “a style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium and believe that he [or she] is in the presence of the object of representation.”¹⁶ Since this style of representation is ingrained into much of our media technology it makes sense that *Reconstructing Mayakovsky* would seek to incorporate elements of immediacy. The mouse interface which allows the user the ability to

¹⁵ “How Interactive,” 609.

¹⁶ Remediation, 272.

manipulate the “galaxy” is effective at creating a sense of interactive immediacy within the object. This causes a specific kind of gratification within the interaction that can best be attributed from a sense of immediacy of touch--feeling the galaxy respond to your grip. The ability to shift the image to the user’s preference draws the user into the experience, creating a sense of control over the object. At the same time, hypermediacy is a counterbalance to the desire for immediacy in digital technologies, and is defined by Bolter and Grusin as “the style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium.”¹⁷ Szilak uses hypermediacy to encourage the reader/user to attach him or herself to the object in an attempt to generate a connection between the object and its reader. The concept of immediacy is also apparent throughout Szilak’s work in the user’s interaction with the various topics in the galaxies. For example, when selecting the topic “Movies,” the user is then transported to a screen displaying a movie clip inserted against the backdrop of an old time theatre. The presence of the historical theatre as the background image for the video serves to reinforce the reader’s awareness that the object he or she is encountering has layers of other media at work. This concept holds true within the second galaxy which holds the topics containing the various chapters. When clicking a topic and being transported to the print chapters of the work, the reader is reminded of the print culture from which the formatting of the sections was lifted. This reminder will encourage the user to consider the layering of multiple media being encountered and generate an awareness of the work’s presence as a web object.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Another concept that becomes conspicuous when interacting with this work is the activation in the reader/user of what Hayles terms “hyper-attention”. She defines “hyper-attention” as the style of reading most common when a user engages digital media, and it is characterized by continuously varying stimuli, a low threshold for boredom, and the ability to process multiple information streams simultaneously. Hayles credits James Sosnoski as the first to define the concept of hyper-reading, which he characterized as “reader-directed, screen-based, computer assisted reading”¹⁸. This idea is definitively applied to the experience of reading/interacting within *Reconstructing Mayakovsky*. As one begins Szilak’s work, this mode of engagement becomes active as the user is bombarded with sensory information, a mixture of sound, print, and video graphics. When encountering the title screen for Szilak’s work, the user is aware not only of the animated galaxy containing floating topics but also the dull hum of the sound effects produced by the galaxy’s motion, itself in turn complemented by a loud thrum when the mouse pointer comes in contact with a topic planet. It is through this use of hyper-attention that the reader is able to collect different stimulants into a cohesive meaning which becomes the actual digital object experience. The loud thrum effect emitted when the mouse interacts with the various topics serves to stimulate the reader forward in the narrative, thereby ensuring consumption of the object. These signifiers throughout the work remain like last vestiges of author intent within this example of new media literature. And yet, even this attempt to exhibit some control over the work is diminished by the open construct Szilak has herself chosen, for despite making some

¹⁸ Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2012, 61.

signifiers and links to choose from the user is still free to proceed through the object in any manner they deem best suited.

Hyper-reading seems to be the proper mode for *Reconstructing Mayakovsky*, as the object demands the reader to make many decisions without the management of an authorial presence instead various forms of stimuli serve as reinforcement. Sound reinforcement (dull hum as opposed to the louder thrum) is the primary and perhaps most subtle method with which the object assists the reader in making decisions. It is important to note that despite these stimuli presented by the object, throughout the interaction each object is experienced only through the reader's control. The work may encourage the reader to interact with it in a certain manner, but as mentioned earlier the end result is always user-oriented.

The presence of changing new media features in *Reconstructing Mayakovsky* does not prevent the reader from noticing one lasting object throughout his or her experience of it: a quotation from Mayakovsky located permanently across the top of the viewing window. Whatever else one sees while navigating through the work, one bit of text, a snippet of Mayakovsky's poem "About This" is always present at the top of the screen:

There he is that great browed quiet scientist, before the experiment,
frowning his brow. Name searching--a book--The Whole Earth its title-list.
The Twentieth Century. Whom to resurrect now? 'There's Mayakovsky
here. Let's find someone brighter - This poets not handsome enough.
Reject.

-Vladimir Mayakovsky, "About This"

As stated earlier, Mayakovsky was a famous poet within the Russian empire who hailed from the region that is now Georgia. The way he is often historically recognized is for being among the most prominent representatives of early 20th century Russian Futurism. This movement promoted a rejection of the past and a celebration of speed, machinery, violence, youth and industry. The strong association between Mayakovsky and the Russian Futurist movement makes him an ideal source of authorial inspiration when considering the digital object. The text is formatted to the stylistic traits that are readily identifiable with traditional print mediums (i.e. punctuation, spacing, indentation) the user has previously experienced. The permanency of the quote throughout the user's interaction with an otherwise changing text makes it remarkable for the reason that other than the galaxy interfaces (which we attributed already to helping encourage the hyper-reading experience) the Mayakovsky quote is the only static piece of media the user has access to throughout the work. Upon closer inspection, given the title of the Mayakovsky poem and his school of thought, it appears that the quote is a clever invitation to literary scholars to brood over this new media object which cleverly mixes the print book with the futuristic tendencies of twenty-first-century e-narrative.

Szilak carefully selected this quotation for its particular relevance not only to her digital object but the medium in which she crafted it. When considering Szilak's inclusion of the poem "About This" into her new media object it can be assumed that it lends itself to some form of artistic authorial intent; perhaps Szilak's commentary on the current state of digital literature. Considered in this light, the passage included from Mayakovsky gains an eerie significance. "Name searching--a book--The Whole Earth its

title-list. The Twentieth Century. Whom to resurrect now?" This section from the poem can easily be identified with the rapid digitalization of literature (think Google books) as the growth of the internet promises to make all books accessible at any given moment. It becomes clear that at the start of the 21st century, with the tremendous pace of technological change, all authors are potentially able to be 'resurrected' in a sense by the curious reader. However, Mayakovsky's poem quickly takes a more bleak outlook-- "There's Mayakovsky here. Let's find someone brighter-This poets not handsome enough. Reject". This might be interpreted as the fear for the cultural status of the author in this new age of literature. Kenneth Goldsmith notes that "traditional notions of writing are primarily focused on 'originality' and 'creativity,' but the digital environment fosters new skill sets."¹⁹ Contained within this emerging skill set is a heightened demand on the author to show consideration to matters of "manipulation" and "management" within their work. Goldsmith contends that within these new skills the author must determine the best way to utilize language in its digital form remaining mindful that "what we take to be graphics, sounds, and motion in our screen world is merely a thin skin under which resides miles and miles of language."²⁰ The author of digital literature must seek to fulfill not only the roles associated with authorial intent in a traditional sense, but must expand this association to be inclusive of distinctly tech specific and managerial traits. Szilak shows an acute awareness of this anxiety in the contemporary literary community as the progression of new forms challenges the pillars of traditional scholarly insight. Goldsmith chooses to close his assessment on the state of the avant-garde by noting writers must understand the shift "from the traditional position of being

¹⁹ Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011, 15.

²⁰ *Uncreative Writing*, 16.

solely generative entities to information managers with organizational capacities.”²¹

Szilak’s work embodies this shift in the author-reader relationship which now favors the reader determining his or her own experience and the author becoming an invisible force behind the object. Upon closer inspection, *Reconstructing Mayakovsky* appears to play with this evolution of literary form, playing upon the evolution of the author-reader relationship, by making the poem from Mayakovsky the only static element to the object. It must be conceded that after experiencing the object the user comes away more familiar with Mayakovsky than the author or any single character within the work. This is perhaps a purposeful effect by Szilak, a subtle acknowledgment to the attachment and recognition provided the traditional notions of authorship in today’s society despite the burgeoning trade of the new media artist. Szilak leaves the work open for extended commentary by successfully ingraining the historic character of Mayakovsky as a representative of traditional authorial intent within an electronic object that defies this same tradition.

The oscillating process of remediation continues developing within Szilak’s work as the reader navigates through the various menus to encounters different “chapters” of text. The text is located under the title galaxy’s topic, “Mechanism B,” which redirects the user to a secondary galaxy of sub-topics under which the chapters are randomly sequenced. The chapters contain differing narratives and dialogue, revolving around the experiences of Mayakovsky or a host of minor characters. The chapters are always formatted according to the traditional print standard without any exception, and serve as

²¹ Ibid., 28.

a reminder of how deeply rooted this traditional style is within the human understanding of narration and literature.

Perplexingly, by selecting a topic and revealing the chapter hidden within it, the user loses the ability to return to the previous screen or, rather, one loses the ability to return to the previous screen in its previous condition. This reveals, in my view, another trademark of new, or digital, media--the concept of a 'dynamic' screen. As I explained above the classic screen is the traditional static image one would expect to encounter within a newspaper or a book. The newly emergent dynamic screen on the other hand is the type of screen we encounter in movies and the internet, and is also known as the screen of 'real time'. Dynamic screens are displayed prominently in *Reconstructing Mayakovsky*, and most effectively within the secondary galaxy accessed under "Mechanism B" where the sub-topics containing the text chapters are renamed after every selection. This makes retracing or predicting the manner in which one encounters the narrative nearly impossible. In essence, every encounter a user has with the text is unique. Szilak utilizes this unique style to display an awareness of a writing concept known as non-sequential writing. This writing style, closely associated with the idea of hypertextuality mentioned earlier, is a term coined from computer programmer Ted Nelson to describe "text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read on an interactive screen."²² Progressing through the branching narrative, the user is again and again brought into self-consciousness as user's implied reader; the authorial intent of the object is for the user to make his or her own decisions on how to proceed through the

²² Qtd. in Chaouli, "How Interactive," 601.

narrative. The dynamic screen is also apparent within the way the user has the ability to grab galaxies of topics and maneuver them until they reach the user's personal preference. This hypertextual element, in addition to placing an emphasis on user-directed plot development, demonstrates Szilak's successful implementation of new media concepts, some of which have also been adopted by print authors; this transition of theory between mediums will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

The ability to remediate a textual narrative while successfully incorporating new media concepts into a cohesive object makes *Reconstructing Mayakovsky* function as an exemplary piece of electronic literature. It manifests features of both traditional print pages and the new media screen. Worthy of distinction for the manner of ease in which it applies the various characteristics of new media, *Reconstructing Mayakovsky* demonstrates how analysis of electronic literature concepts can be used successfully alongside traditional print ideals. These traits make Szilak's work an excellent starting point for readers seeking to gain experience with electronic literature. The work would also serve well as teaching material in a classroom seeking examples of ways electronic literature incorporates aspects of new media with aspects of the modern novel.

NEW WORD ORDER: BASRA

When speaking of literatures ability to incorporate new media objects, another work of interest is *New Word Order: Basra* by Sandy Baldwin.²³ Baldwin's object is exemplary in its ability to demonstrate the aptitude of literature to incorporate modern electronic mediums. Baldwin's work is a "mod" of the popular video game *Half-Life* (the term mod, or modification, is popular in video game culture for user-generated content that modifies the original platform; in the case of Baldwin's work the original platform is *Half-Life*). Into a violent first-person shooter game Baldwin has incorporated a short Billy Collins poem, "Introduction to Poetry." Baldwin describes her purpose in this work as being to provide the user a glimpse into "how language plays into your interactions with the violent world of the game." Through the inclusion of poetry, Baldwin has remediated a video game into a work of literary value. At the same time, *New Word Order: Basra* utilizes many of the traits other successful new media objects such as Szilak's employ.

For users who might at first be confused about how the object may function, Baldwin links an introductory video paired with an essay detailing more thoroughly her intention and reasoning. The main object of *New World Order: Basra* is the modification of the video game *Half-Life*, and if the user is not familiar with first-person shooter video games it can be difficult to interact with the work at first. Once inside the modification the user is transported to the fortress like arena where the battle occurs as in *Half-Life*. The area of difference at this moment is that instead of hunting and destroying opposing players the user is confronted with Collins' poem arranged haphazardly throughout the rooms of the level. It is in this manner that Baldwin guides the user into interacting with

²³ http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/baldwin_basra.html

the object, and given the nature of the medium through which the text is experienced a violent juxtaposition of warfare and culture is created. The user starts the *New Word Order: Basra* experience equipped with various weapons found in the original game; indeed, these weapons are the only available tools with which the user can interact with the environment. This leads to the inevitable deconstruction of the language of Collins' poem, a central theme to *New Word Order*. Baldwin like Szilak takes an invisible role in the user's experience, preferring to let the user explore the object open-endedly and without the overt expression of authorial or narratorial guidance.

As in Szilak's work, interface parameters of affordance become clear after a little time navigating the object. Growing awareness of the predetermined nature of Baldwin's work directs the user seemingly down the path of hyper-reading. The user might at first feel free to interact with the object in any manner that he or she deems fit, but in reality he or she is being assisted in their experience by the parameters of a "first person shooter" interface. Analyzing hypertextual works like these, Chaouli identifies a paradox such that more flexibility in fact inheres in print narrative in, where "the lack of choices on one level (the topology of the text) creates limitless choices on another (the phenomenology of reading)."²⁴ This is to say, when the text stays still the reader is free to read and think as he or she wishes and can from there go on to interpret the work. With some updated language it becomes clear that Chaouli's commentary can hold equally true to new media objects. Users of *New Word Order: Basra* may not at first see the limitations placed upon them by the object; they are occupied with the sense of

²⁴ "How Interactive," 612.

freedom they have in choosing how to interact in some ways within the medium, for instance turning left and right, looking up and down, and striking or shooting. But freedom of interaction within the object can leave the user feeling unsure of how to process the nature of his or her own experience in relation to the literary object. Despite theory that says interactive fiction makes the reader more free and engaged, too much interactivity can leave a user feeling disoriented within the object, particularly if they are not gifted with prior *Half-Life* experience. At the same time, as Chaouli argues, a user/reader cannot interpret the object as he or she would a typical work of print literature because the object has indistinct boundaries dependent in part on the subjectivity of the reader/user and therefore by definition partly opaque to him or her. This makes Baldwin's explanatory essay *The Nihilanth: Immersivity in a First-Person Gaming Mod* essential to understanding the overall composition of *New Word Order: Basra*.

To develop a better understanding of how essential the "Nihilanth" essay is to Baldwin's new media object, we must now take up the concept of machine reading and how it affects one's interaction with *New Word Order: Basra*. Machine reading according to Matthew Kirschenbaum "takes an instrument or device rather than a text as its locus" of reading.²⁵ It competes with hyper-reading as a method for conveying meaning to the user in new media objects. Baldwin's work is an example of machine reading because the text from Collins' poem is secondary in the nature of the user's interaction to the game interface of *Half-Life*. Hayles describes the differences between these reading

²⁵ Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2012, 19.

styles similarly, noting “Hyper reading may not be useful for large corpora, and machine algorithms have limited interpretive capabilities” (72). It is exactly this limited sense of interpretive capability that Baldwin struggles to negate with the addition of her authorial description and essay. Hayles addresses why this lack of interpretive capability exists: “the more the emphasis falls on pattern (as in machine reading), the more likely it is that context must be supplied from outside (by a human interpreter) to connect pattern with meaning.”²⁶ In the case of *New Word Order: Basra*, where the experience is heavily represented within the machine algorithms of the modification, the reader’s relationship to the text becomes blurred, lacking any definition. Baldwin shows her awareness of this situation through the inclusion of interpretive materials for her user. These materials enable the user to gain valuable meaning as to the functions of the interface and objects and an understanding of how to further interact with them.

The “Nihilanth” essay details Baldwin’s intentions in creating the work: “Being in the game is the placement and occupation of immersive language situations, not necessarily as destined for discursive production but a heuristic or poetic situation for addressing otherness. My focus here is immersion, with reference to the deep and dimensional environments of first person computer gaming. Immersion in computer space is incoherent.”²⁷ As an author, her interest is the reader’s experience of being immersed within the text, proof she was conscious of the reader’s need for immediacy when interacting with the object. She also displays familiarity with literary theory by appealing to Iser and allowing the reader to determine his or her interpretation. Baldwin

²⁶ *How We Think*, 74.

²⁷ http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/baldwin_basra/irw_baldwin.pdf

goes on to comment on the kind of hyper-reading activated by *New World Order*, “You can keep playing and wandering in the space, of course, but you soon begin to attack the words. It cannot be helped. The attack is a part of the immersive conditions of the space. The crowbar will destroy individual letters; the rifle or grenades will take out whole words or more. Soon the words are broken and reduced.”²⁸ Baldwin’s user literally destroys the language he or she encounter, and must do so; she manages to encourage the user inconspicuously to arrive at this intent--without feeling any outside authorial impulse directing him or her.

The video that accompanies Baldwin’s object is also worth commenting on in more depth. The video can be found when one clicks ‘begin’ and starts interaction with *New Word Order: Basra*. From there one has access to the three main headings within the object. By clicking on the “Video” tab the user initiates a download of the *basra.mov* file. Baldwin subtitles the heading “The *basra.mov* file documents the mod. Click video button to watch.” Compared to the previous work by Szilak, this type of instruction sets itself apart, especially when considered as an addition to the already discussed essay. The video functions much like any paratextual preface, and contains a demonstrated run through of the modification. Again what keeps this object a modern narrative at this point is that the user still has the option to interact with the object at his or her leisure. The object will function as intended whether the user accesses the supplemental media provided or not.

²⁸ http://collection.eliterature.org/2/works/baldwin_basra/irw_baldwin.pdf

These materials, when combined with the object, provide the reader with the necessary background to purposefully interact with Baldwin's work. Suddenly the user finds him or herself interacting with the object in a critical manner, experiencing the author's intent. Baldwin achieves this effect through a key strategy of remediation as defined by Bolter and Grusin: oscillating between effects of hypermediacy and "immediacy." Baldwin manipulates the traditional medium of the first person shooter video game through her infusion of the Collins poem, creating a new immersive poem that encourages the reader to react with *Half Life* in an unintended and partially uncontrollable manner. This manipulation, with the user unexpectedly encountering a poem within a game context, allows the reader to enter a state of immediacy within Baldwin's object and encounter it on a critical level. The poem, now a stylized piece of hypermediated "content," renders the total game interface, by contrast, more immediate and spontaneous. As a user of *New Word Order* one encounters a strong urge to interact with the words spilled across the screen and, attracted to the foreignness of the environment it is easy to forget the medium and seek to interact with the words on their own terms, as it were. It is through this urge to interact with the total game interface that Baldwin encourages the sense of hypermediacy within the user. During the interaction the user remains conscious of the levels of the object they are interacting with, creating odd juxtapositions and a dynamic reading environment. It is clear from the analysis of Baldwin's work that electronic literature objects exhibit traits designed to focus on providing an immersive experience for the user, and these same objects also seek to manipulate the traditional sense of narrative, shifting the emphasis towards the reader directing his or her own experience with the work.

TOC: A New Media Novel

Embracing the shift to dynamic digital screens within the narrative tradition and moving the focus of interpretation onto the reader is something that *TOC: A New-Media Novel* by Steve Tomasula does admirably. *TOC* is exactly what the subtitle would suggest: a creative attempt at melding the tradition of the novel with digital technology. Main creator Steve Tomasula is considered to be at the forefront of writers seeking to explore the limitations of the novel. *TOC* is described on its case as:

A new-media hybrid, *TOC* re-imagines what the book is, and can be. Produce as a DVD for playback on personal computers (both MACs and PCs), *TOC* retains the intimate, one-on-one experience that a reader can have with a book even as it draws on the powers of other art forms to immerse readers in an altogether new multimedia story.²⁹

While this description adequately explains the lofty goals envisioned by Tomasula when creating *TOC*, it fails to properly attribute the myriad of ways in which it differs from its print counterparts. While a user of this object is provided a unique one-on-one experience, it is far from being similar to that which is provided by the book.

A user is first clued into the dramatic change represented by Tomasula's object through his or her initial encounter. Unlike prior books one has encountered, *TOC* is packaged in the manner of a DVD or video game, but interestingly enough still comes registered with an ISBN number. When more closely examined it becomes obvious that many contributors beside Tomasula had a hand in the construction of this object.

²⁹ Tomasula, Steve, with Stephen Farrell, Christian Jara, Matt Lavoy, and Maria Tomasula. *TOC: A New Media Novel*. Tuscaloosa, Ala: University of Alabama, 2009. Back Cover.

Whereas a print text is generally known to mainly acknowledge the author and his or her editors, this new media object credits the work of a sound designer (Christian Jara), an animator (Matt Lavoy), musicians (Paul Johnson and Chris Pielak), and various narrators. This multiplicity of creative voices clearly makes the new media object a medium of literary and aesthetic values. However, I believe that because of these additional creative forces, the intentions of the author are more easily distorted within the digital medium especially when viewed in comparison to print tradition.

This is not to say that *TOC* does not display or demonstrate any characteristics of (singular) authorial intent. In fact, it proclaims its authorial intent on the back cover of the object, "*TOC* is a multimedia epic about time--the invention of the second, the beating of a heart, the story of humans connecting through time to each other and to the world." This type of commentary will undoubtedly have some influence upon the reader, who if not interested in reading the back of the object, would become aware of this concept through the initial moments of loading the text. Much in the manner of Szilak's work, *TOC* opens by presenting the reader with the image of a galaxy containing a cluster of stars set against the vast blackness of space. Accompanying this image as the story progresses is an epigraph from Saint Augustine which slowly emerges across the screen: "What then is time. If no one asks me. I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner. I know not." A critical reader will be cognizant of the purposeful inclusion of these signifiers of authorial intent and will seek to link these signifiers to the overall meaning of the object.

After the epigraph fades, a voice begins to detail the story of Ephemera and her two sons Chronos and Logos. Chronos and Logos become the central characters of the narrative, which details an everlasting struggle between the two over an island they both inhabit. This never-ending conflict can be heard dimly playing out behind the narrator, faint scuffles and sounds of struggle, allowing the reader to achieve a real connection with the story. In fact it is within this introduction that the multi-media aspects of *TOC* are best utilized. The narrator sets a fittingly ominous tone, which is accompanied by an equally appropriate barrage of audio stimulants (dreary music, bodies struggling, and echoes). In addition to these audio elements the video of the introduction makes perhaps the biggest impact--by having the least presence. After the narration has achieved its relatively early shift to focusing on the brothers' wish to rule the island, the video portion of the introduction shifts to display a simple colorful image of an island. This solid image of the island allows the reader to connect with the theme of location without it being overly distracting or causing a disengagement from the narrative. The user of the object is able to form a mental connection to the image of Chronos and Logos deep with the ruins of the jungle nation gridlocked in an eternal struggle.

As the introduction draws to a close, the user is prepared to experience the digital object by being placed firmly within the story. As the narration draws to a close, the voice speaks passingly of how philosophers and historians were known to occasionally frequent the site of the brothers' conflict and make wagers on who they thought the victor to be. After revealing this fact the voice fades into silence and the user is left observing a screen which contains a box of sand for Chronos, a box filled

with water for Logos, and following the narration a stone with which the user can place his or her wager. The critical reader will notice him or herself now placed in the islands past of historians and philosophers in seeking to predict the outcome between Chronos vs. Logos. *TOC* seeks to establish willful interaction between object and user by placing him or her directly within the narrative, while also seeking to inspire the user to consider the object in a deeper light. By giving the title of philosopher and/or historian to the user Tomasula is incorporating a not so subtle plea that the user takes the time to critically examine *TOC* in all of its intricacies. It is at this point that authorial intention fades from being a controlling influence on the reader's interpretation of *TOC*. At least one review of *TOC*, by Ed Falco, concerned itself with addressing this change in reading style, "if reading a traditional narrative can be thought of as a journey along a path with a clearly marked beginning and end, then reading a new media work is like a journey through a field where there are several possible entrances and exits."³⁰ (Here again we could note the echoes of Barthes' words about textuality, quoted at the start.) The reader must take an active interest in the object and cast the stone into a box of their choosing while receiving no guidance or stimulations from the object. Nonetheless the user must choose a path.

Choosing the box of sand belonging to Chronos opens it, revealing an elaborate needle that begins tracking its way across a scroll of musical script. This movement of the needle across the script begins a sound recording detailing the life troubles of a vogue model. While engaged with this story the user is allowed the option of viewing a

³⁰ Falco, Ed. "New Media and Time." *American Book Review* (2009) pg 21

corresponding video that plays alongside the audio narration of the vogue model's story. The term 'allowed' is most suitable for describing the user's access to the video because, although access to the video is granted through the object, the user would have to successfully navigate him or herself onto the small representation of the video playing in a moon like sphere next to the Chronos box. Again there is no form of authorial direction cluing the user to the object's ability to manifest the video in a much larger and clearer window. This deeper level of access to the Chronos box is available only to the user who seeks to interact with the object. A user who chooses to engage the object in the print tradition from the viewpoint of authorial influence will likely miss out on many of the more technical and multifaceted workings of Tomasula's object. This stress on the reader to interact with the object is what distinguishes *TOC* from its peers, but is also what makes it somewhat inaccessible to the average reader of print novels. This feeling of inaccessibility can be attributed to the lack of authorial influence within the object, but also to the user's unfamiliarity of the reading style required for a new media object. Another intriguing aspect of the Chronos representation is that once the user has engaged the box by dropping the stone in it he or she loses freedom to interact with the object, for instance pause the audio recording and accompanying video. The only way the user can finish interaction with the Chronos box is through a complete consumption of the object, or by hitting the escape (ESC) key and disengaging the work entirely. Once a user disengages from the Chronos selection they are brought back to the home screen of the object and again presented with the stone for which to make a selection.

The other possible interaction for the user occurs when he or she chooses to drop the stone into the box filled with water belonging to Logos. In the latter case, the story displays the animation of the box sliding open to reveal a display of the sliding scroll. This sliding scroll is again designated with colorful indications, making it reminiscent of the playable sheet music for pianos. Once the box has fully opened the sheet music begins to scroll within the box beginning a repetitive melody. Logos differs from Chronos in a key aspect here, in that rather than having an accompanying movie for this section of the object, Tomasula has placed the traditional text element within the box of Logos. The various chapters of text are accessible by clicking off to the left of the box much in the manner the user gained access to the video from within the Chronos box. However, again the sense of authorial direction is diminished by the lack of influence, and the user has no way of knowing the texts are located next to the box as they have no clear markings or signifiers alerting the reader to their presence. A particularly timid or novice user could certainly be overcome by the object at this moment, waiting for the object to generate some kind of direction while the music drones on endlessly. (It wasn't until having experienced the object several times that I was able to navigate the sections of text with any confidence, and was more often the result of strenuous clicking and guessing.) As a user trained in traditional reading methods might not be prepared to explore the matter with the confidence that Tomasula expects, choosing instead to wait thinking that the musical scroll will at some point fill the authorial void and direct him or her. That being said, one of the most impressive aspects of TOC is the consideration with which Tomasula handles the implementation of textual elements. Having discovered a section of text the user will then hear, the

music subside a level to a gentle ticking of a clock for a moment before fading into silence. This silence while text is presented serves a purpose that's twofold: it signifies the user of the importance of the print element within the work encouraging their full interaction to the exclusion of all outside media, and demonstrates Tomasula's success at allowing *TOC* to function as a work that can activate both styles of reading within the reader (both the digital and print). Chronos, with its movie and audio elements seems well suited to engage the reader in the multifaceted approach associated with digital or hyperreading. Logos working as the other half within this duality of traditions functions as a representative of the print reading method. This is apparent through the consideration given to the text when accessed, the lack of text within the Chronos box, and the lack of other media presence within the Logos box--one could argue that the flow of music is merely an 'interactive' buffer of shorts while the user searches out the textual elements within this section.

After encountering both the Chronos and Logos boxes, the user will eventually discover himself or herself mired in another meditation on the nature of time--the island section. Once a user has managed to proceed to the island section one is presented with a screen displaying an island ringed by moons, with each moon revealing a textual narrative detailing a belief held by the islands inhabitants. The island is inhabited by the Tics and the Tocs, in staying with the concept of time, and the user will find that the moons' texts are divided equally in support between the two. It is through interaction with the moons that the user is able to complete the narrative displaying the end screen in which an 'Influencing Machine' emerges from the center of the island and explodes.

Through the explosion the user is transported back up through space and time until one is again in the presence Saint Augustine's quote. This ending to the object is interesting in that it reaffirms this idea that the digital object is an entity providing its user endless opportunity for consumption. The object continues to stimulate the user into interaction even after its consumption by instilling this cyclical element into its design.

The major drawback when encountering *TOC*, or any digital object, is the heavy responsibility levied upon the reader to progress the narrative through haptic means in addition to reading. Sustaining the level of interest needed to interact effectively with the object, a user whose reading ideology is rooted in print tradition can grow frustrated at the unresponsiveness of the text. It took several interactions with the object to discover the true depth of *Logos* and the narratives contained within the island. Had I not been interested in the critical aspects of its construction and display of remediation it is likely that I would have been unable to muster the patience to consume the object in its entirety. While this sense of disconnect is going to be on some level attributable to the interactive element the object seeks to establish, it could be handled in a more refined fashion. In this fashion the digital novel has yet to determine the best way to maintain its authorial intent while still providing the user the interactive environment for which it is heralded.

The reason *TOC* is successful both as a new media object and textual narrative is that Tomasula shows a competent understanding of the manners in which readers engage different media, and allows *TOC* to focus on enhancing the users' experience

through the use of media and print. The result is an object that represents all medias within it, thereby achieving a sense of coherence through this inclusion rather than a sense of 'fraction' or disjointedness which immediately pushes inexperienced digital users away from interaction with a piece of electronic literature-- finding the experience perhaps to foreign. Tomasula allows the work to achieve its own identity by not forcing any of the media concepts to work in environments where they might prove ineffective. For instance, the silence presented by the object when the reader accesses narrative chapters shows an understanding by Tomasula that the user of *TOC* will be able to take more from the narrative without having outside distractions. Tomasula allows the print elements in *TOC* to function in their own space, understanding that a crucial characteristic of print narrative is the establishment of deep attention. Likewise when the user is engaged with the box of Chronos, the audio scroll plays the story without demanding the user view the accompanying video. Again the user is presented with the choice of adding another media element to his or her experience. But the important designation here is that the user is given the option to forgo the video, which an inexperienced user might prefer, allowing him or her to focus more intently on the story of the Vogue model. If the user does choose to access the accompanying video, he or she will then experience the video playing in a sequential manner to the audio recording. It is important to note that even inexperienced users should be able to fully access this object given time, because even while combining video and sound Tomasula does not require his reader to strictly engage all media within the object choosing instead to give the reader choices in the level of mediation they prefer. Tomasula is fortunate enough to find the perfect balance between print tradition and

new media conceptualism within his object *TOC*, making it worthy of the scholarly acclaim it has garnered and admirably suited to serve as a representation for the promise that exists within new media objects and electronic literature.

While these concepts mentioned can easily be denoted within the digital works of new media authors, an important question that must be posed is how do they translate to print culture? For a better understanding of the way print culture is modernizing itself to compete within the digital era the essay will apply the same concepts mentioned throughout the essay but viewed through the lens of a print text. These devices become much more subtle and technical when considered within the print tradition. I offer that a good way to understand the shift in tradition is through the distinctions of dynamic screen vs. classic screen. In dealing with print culture the essay will be shifting the focus of analysis to those mediums of the classic screen type (i.e. books). In other words, one of the primary obstacles print tradition faces in competing with the new media objects is the roadblock of not being able to access dynamic interfaces. Concepts such as hyper-reading, immediacy, and hypermediacy are much harder to activate within the text because in print one lacks the ability to affect changes in real time. Also in shifting the method through which one analyses a text, the manner in which one relates to the medium shifts as well; with new media objects we were concerned with the concept of hyper-attention, when analyzing print works it is the nature of the book to be a conduit for deep attention. This desire to stay relevant within an increasingly multimedia focused society modern narratives are seeking to include and demonstrate the books ability to

activate hyper-attention within the reader while still maintaining the traditional trait of deep attention.

HOUSE OF LEAVES

A contemporary novel acclaimed for its ability to address and partially bypass obstacles presented by its print medium is Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000). *House of Leaves* is celebrated for exhibiting interesting narrative shifts and adding remediation effects through clever stylistic choices. For instance, one such stylistic choice is the manner in which *House of Leaves* chooses to present itself, as a 709 page tome of information, capable of housing multiple narratives, media, and displaying all the tendencies of an otherwise digital experience. Starting with the table of contents, *House of Leaves* differs from traditional print novels a user would be familiar with. Not only does it incorporate the traditional narrative titled *The Navidson Record*, but also houses six sections titled "Exhibits," and various Appendices called Zampano, Johnny Truant, Yggdrasil, and Contrary Evidence. Through these various sections the reader comes to experience the object *House of Leaves* and gain a true appreciation for the ability of the print tradition to adapt to the current media environment.

House of Leaves may then be seen to exemplify the emergence of a new style once identified by Gregory Ulmer as "electracy," which Hayles argues "has more in common with the ways in which image and text come together on the Web than to the

linearity of alphabetic language bound in a print book.”³¹ This emergent form of electracy challenges many of the traditional stylistic elements that have become associated with traditional linear patterning of novelistic prose. Danielewski embraces this idea of electracy and demonstrates its effectiveness. He exposes the text’s roots in web culture through the inclusion of stylistic choices regarding the words **domus** and **house**. Both words are shown in the bold blue color that the reader would immediately associate with hyperlinks on the early internet. This stylistic element occurs throughout the text and serves as a constant reminder to the user that the house within the narrative is truly an all-encompassing entity. The concept of the hyperlink serves in essence as the web model for the house that is encountered within the narrative, meaning that it is deceptive about how much information that it can contain or conceal.

Chapter 9 is among the more infamous sections of the text, and is known for its experimentation with print and visual presentation. Hayles addressed the appeal of this chapter in a recent article concerned with the way in which remediation occurs there, noting “the title “The Labyrinth” makes explicit what is already implicit in the typography: *House of Leaves* mirrors the House on Ashtree Lane, both of which are imaged as a labyrinth, a figure embossed in black on the cover” (791). Indeed the textual presentation within chapter 9 makes it the ideal representation for the object, text is layered, multi-directional, and vast. Danielewski achieves these features through various methods of textual manipulation, in some places large sections of the text are thinly crossed out (maintain their legibility); while in other sections of the chapter the text

³¹ Electronic Literature, 70.

is placed in boxed compartments (reflecting the windowed aspect of modern media).

Alongside the textual elements contained within this chapter, Danielewski continues the fractured narrative adding into the chapter the legend of King Midas and the Minotaur. Much like the house within the narrative, the lore of Midas, the Minotaur, and the maze, embodies the concept of linear story vs. the emergent hyperactive form. While most users of the text will be well acquainted with the traditional myth, which is detailed within the chapter, Danielewski incites a hyperactive element to the narrative through the inclusion of alternative versions of the classic myth, included but not limited to a version where the minotaur is not a mythical creature bent on the destruction of innocents, but rather a deformed person stuck in a maze so complex in its conception that those forced to join him starve in their attempts to find their way out. The user familiar with digital objects can't help but feel themselves engaged in a sense of hyperactive reading, particularly within this chapter, as the narrative is fractured and scattered across the pages, authorial direction fades away as the user loses sight of the Navidson narrative and becomes immersed in text and lore.

House of Leaves starts with an introduction provided by the ostensible editor of the book, Johnny Truant, a "rocker"-type individual who works at a tattoo parlor and has a passion for a stripper named Thumper. Truant describes the life-altering contents of the enclosed narrative that he footnotes and tries to reconstruct. Truant claims to have received the book from the care of an aged man named Zampano. In many ways *House of Leaves* attempts to bring the multiplicity of experiences heralded within the electronic literature community to the paperback. Much like an internet browser can contain

multiple windows, each in its own separate medium; *House of Leaves* contains narratives within narratives. Zampano's commentary, set in Times font, occupies the upper portions of the pages, while Johnny's footnotes stay below in Courier (though this distinction of location holds less truth the farther into the narrative one progresses). On the surface there is the story of Truant's life at a tattoo parlor and his ownership of this book from Zampano. Beyond this is the story of Zampano and his experience with the "Navidson Record," and within that story is the actual story of the Navidson family who bought a house that defies the principles of physics, growing inside while holding its original form on the outside. In many ways the house becomes a symbol for the reader's experience with Danielewski's novel, for while the book itself is limited in its size by the constraints of its' medium (binding, paper strength, etc.) the narratives, footnotes and annotations spiral out in an endless fashion. When considering how many inscription technologies and media are included within the text, for example "video, photography, tattoos, typewriters, telegraphy, handwriting, and digital computers,"³² the user gets a better concept of the inclusiveness this text exhibits.

House of Leaves has the aim to remediate other mediums into its pages. This much is clear. To better understand what is to be gained from the inclusion of multiple medias, it is important to note, as Bolter and Grusin do, that remediation can happen in both "directions," with newer object remediating older forms and vice versa. For instance, the "Navidson Record" is a collection of short home films by documentary filmmaker Will Navidson detailing the strange occurrences within the house he and his

³² Hayles, Katherine N. "Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*." *American Literature* 74.4 (2002): 779-806. pg 781

family inhabit. For this reason much of *House of Leaves* plot elements revolve around another medium, film, making the stylistics when approaching the narration of such a story particularly interesting. Danielewski handles the incorporation of the film into the narrative with exceptional grace: "Navidson takes a break to interview his two children. These shots are also impeccably composed. Son and daughter bathed in sunlight" (9). This detailing of another medium through prose shows Danielewski's awareness of the modality of modern print. The user must spend more time to develop attentiveness with the text, but the payoff comes in Danielewski being able to exert influence over the user's experience that allows the user to visualize the "Navidson Record" in one's mind, thus creating an altered, perhaps we might say mimetic, form of remediation. This form requires the reader to willingly engage the intent of the author--a dramatic shift from the shadowy authorial figure of digital media--yet maintains the fractured style which is a trademark of modern media. Danielewski comments on this fragmented aspect of the text through Johnny Truant's experience, "As I discovered, there were reams and reams of it. Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off."³³ *House of Leaves* does not constrain the reader, but rather provides a thoroughly individualized reading experience through this branching out of narrative. This aspect again reflects the modern narrative style Iser speaks of in describing the implied reader while remaining in many respects a combination of traditional narratives.

³³ *House of Leaves*, pg 17

Apart from the mimesis of other media in Danielewski's text, *House of Leaves* successfully exhibits other characteristics of digital media objects. One of these features is what Hayles identifies as the inclusion of dynamic hierarchies and heterarchies, both consisting of "a multitiered system in which feedback and feedforward loops tie the system together through continuing interactions circulating throughout the hierarchy."³⁴ Danielewski encourages a dynamic hierarchy within his work by exploiting the flexibility provided by print stylistic elements such as typography, font size, font color, spacing, and the like. The tapes of Will Navidson form the main narrative and are indicated by the standard font of the novel. Zampano writes a continuing narrative of his thoughts on the Navidson Record through footnotes, each character designated by a specific font. Layered within these narratives lies the story of Johnny Truant, whose comments include reflections on his life, Zampano's footnotes, and the Navidson Record, all neatly composed as yet another series of footnotes in yet another font. However as mentioned this composure exhibited by the work breaks down as the text progresses until climaxing in chapter 9. Even when Danielewski is deconstructing textual elements within *House of Leaves* he still maintains a dynamic hierarchy through the multiple narratives he establishes. The Navidson film, Will Navidson, Zampano, and Johnny Truant, are constantly reaffirming and contending with each other's narratives. This interaction between narrators creates the feedback and feedforward loops that are essential to the establishment of the dynamic hierarchy. When Danielewski combined a multiplicity of narration with varying stylistic textual elements he created an object that lends itself well to establishing all the key aspects required to make *House of Leaves*

³⁴ *Electronic Literature*, pg 45

function as a multitiered system tied together by continuous interactions circulated within a hierarchy--in other words a digital media object in textual form.

Danielewski's aesthetic choices encourage another characteristic of electronic literature, namely what Hayles calls "intermediation." Building from Nicholas Gessler, Hayles argues that intermediation is "first level emergent pattern captured in another medium and re-represented with the primitives of the new medium."³⁵ This concept of intermediation is fundamentally evident in *House of Leaves* through the entire Navidson Record narrative. Will Navidson's collection of fictional videos becomes captured within the prose of Danielewski the print author, but is also re-represented through the other narratives interactions with the Navidson Record. Johnny Truant even makes a subtle commentary on the flexibility of print when talking about Zampano's notes written on "old napkins, that tattered edges of an envelope, once even on the back of a postage stamp; everything and anything but empty; each fragment completely covered with the creep of years and years of ink pronouncements; layered, crossed out, amended; handwritten, typed; legible, illegible; impenetrable, lucid; torn, stained, scotch taped, some bits crisp and clean, others faded."³⁶ That Zampano's notes are included within the text and occur in such varied form are sure signs of Danielewski's desire to intermediate the novel and other media. Through this intermediation *House of Leaves* gains an ever-increasing amount of critical depth from which the user can enhance his or her experience. Does one choose to consider the importance of the words, sentences, and passages crossed out within the text? What could be deciphered from

³⁵ *Electronic Literature*, 45

³⁶ *House of Leaves*, xvii.

the illegible sections of the text? Various mental nuances such as these keep the user engaged with the text and also remind one of the incredible ability of print to reinvent itself despite the options provided through other inscription devices.

House of Leaves provides its user with a multitude of reading experiences bound in a traditional print medium. At the same time, its ability to incorporate various new media characteristics has only added to the novel's success and status as an epitome of the millennial 'turn' to new media in literature. Many scholars, including Hayles, view Danielewski's work as the future of book narrative as it seeks to compete against the all-encompassing experiences provided by new media. Lofty expectations combined with the fact that *House of Leaves* was 'born digital' makes Danielewski's text particularly attractive to serve as the herald for the future of narrative and stylistic use in print culture. When the characteristics of *House of Leaves* are compared to those of *Reconstructing Mayakovsky*, *New Word Order: Basra*, and *TOC* it becomes a valid representation of what print tradition could develop into through the intermediation of new media influence.

CONCLUSION

Recall that in "Discourse in the Novel" Bakhtin speaks of the novel seeking to be the pinnacle of representational comprehension by combining varied serious social consciousness with authorial intention. This concept is notably distorted within the new media objects I have chosen, with the discourse being heavily slanted towards social

consciousness in each work. However, given that Bakhtin wrote this piece many years before the advent of the internet it stands to reason he could not have predicted the popularization of the technology-saturated environments we now inhabit. For this reason the reader should not be alarmed at the notion that these examples of contemporary narrative do not always conform particularly well to the primary stylistic elements for exceptional prose he dictated: internal stratification of language, social heteroglossia, and variety of individual voices. At the same time, many features that apply to print narrative also apply to electronic text. Chaouli agrees that technological concepts incorporated into contemporary literature will fundamentally change traditional notions of literature. He reasons that the current trend in authorship “does not produce primarily readers but writers, and these writers do not write to be authors; what they put down is not meant to amuse or instruct other readers, rewarding them as readers.”³⁷ In this new digital age the traditional stylistic elements of prose that have stood for centuries are suddenly open for redefinition, and a new class of authors and experts rush to place them within the context of our literary history.

Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell are among this new generation of scholars seeking to make sense of the digital media studies from a literary viewpoint. They contend in a recent article concerning second-person address in recent fiction and gaming that “the discipline and practice of close reading digital fiction requires a more systematic engagement with the possibilities and limitations of the form.”³⁸ The findings of this essay validate their claim that through engagement with the objects use of and limitation

³⁷ “How Interactive,” 616.

³⁸ Ensslin, Astrid, and Alice Bell. “Click=Kill’:Textual You in Ludic Digital Fiction.” *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Study* 4.1 (2012): 49-73, 49.

of form a user can more readily decipher the critical value of a new media object.

Another point of agreement this essay reaches through the findings of Ensslin and Bell is their claim that: “What is more important to a *literary* analyst ... is the extent to which a digital text facilitates deep attention rather than hyperattention in the reader.”³⁹ A prime example of this is *TOC* and the way in which Tomasula successfully implements a media object that supports the development of deep attention in its user while dealing with non-textual elements. Exhibiting this dynamic, but in reverse, is *House of Leaves*, where Danielewski seeks to implement a sense of hyperattention within the text. The effectiveness with which a new media object seeks to establish either form of attention is intrinsically reliant upon the form of the object; print objects will be more successful in this digital age if they are able to successfully incorporate some level of hyper attention stimulation in order to stay fresh and modern, while digital objects must seek to access a level of deep attention allowing them to compete with the sense of connection incurred through a traditional print narrative. Both mediums seek to sustain their social value through the engagement and intermediation of other popular forms of media.

It is this very competition for the user’s attention that drives the emergence of new media objects. As Nicholas Carr argues in his popular recent book *The Shallows*, “changes in reading style will also bring changes in writing style, as authors and their publishers adapt to readers’ new habits and expectations” (104). Carr’s statement gains credence through the existence of the objects essential to this essay-- *House of Leaves*, *New Word Order: Basra*, *Reconstructing Mayakovsky*, and *TOC*. Authors have noticed

³⁹ “Click=Kill,” 55.

the shift in media consumption among the digital generations and are creating objects to appeal to both the hyperattentive digital user and the deep attention oriented print reader. Works such as *TOC* and *House of Leaves* show the promise that these modern notions of narrative exhibit when properly constructed. Deep attention does not have to be found solely within the pages of a print text, and hyper attention is no longer relegated only to the digital. Instead the modern advent of new media has allowed the author to utilize both types of attention, thereby creating new works that demonstrate a greater understanding of the reading process and the most suitable ways of enhancing it. Both Tomasula and Danielewski were able to successfully intermediate mediums outside of their objects without overstressing the narrative or over stimulating their reader. Being conscious of a medium's specific traits and tendencies should become a prerequisite for every author seeking to establish him or herself in new media genres. The media must be given its own environment within the narrative, something specifically geared towards the enhancement of the users experience through the medium in order to be most successfully and naturally utilized.

The embrace of new media objects within academe is growing, and essential for the continued development of scholarly interest in contemporary narrative, and to avoid stagnation within the field. Jeffrey Di Leo supports this assessment in his article "The Culture of the Book--and Why it Must End," noting "this new object--the scholarly contribution that is possible only digitally--is now emerging. When it does, and only then, will we come to realize ... that our true challenge is to learn how to read in a digital

age.”⁴⁰ Learning to teach and encourage students to engage with the digital reading experience is critical for continued modernization of the field. Unlike Di Leo, I would not venture so far to say that book culture no longer has a place within the educational institutions of higher learning -- print culture will still be essential in fostering deep attention and helping students develop narratological concepts. However the undeniable truth is that print technology is on the decline while digital media continue to take a more prominent place in our total media ecology. Through course offerings inclusive of the digital media objects, teachers and students will be better equipped to interact with these new narrative constructs, which will only continue to rise in popularity. Also to be gained through this interaction is the fostering of insightful scholarly opinion at the highest level. Once scholars have been properly introduced to digital novels, and the avant garde tradition in print seeking to emulate it, the intellectual community will be rewarded with a more detailed understanding of the educational and aesthetic potential to be found within these works.

The field of literary studies should seize upon this recent advent in technology and welcome the digital novel (and electronic literature generally) into its core studies. New media objects serve as a perfect representation not only literary values and concepts, but the digital novel provides the opportunity for scholars across disciplines (art, film, photography, literature, writing) to come together in the pursuit of knowledge. An aesthetic movement capable of unifying the scholarly interest of the humanities is an ideal that has been in the works since the discovery of the remediation process. This

⁴⁰ Di Leo, Jeffrey R. "The Culture of the Book--and Why It Must End." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 57.6 (2010): B8-B9. EBSCO. Web. B8.

process of remediation, or intermediation if that term is preferred, is embodied through the creation of electronic literature which fully embraces both digital and print traditions. Moving forward into the future, scholars dealing with digital objects across the humanities will find their research applicable across disciplines. Electronic literature provides the opportunity for a free flowing exchange of intellectual ideas among the art critics and the literary experts, between photographers and musical historians, offering a distilled aesthetic experience with the ability to stimulate users across a wide range of interests. Viewed in this light, digital objects, despite their sense of unfamiliarity at the moment, provide readers with some of the very same traits that endeared traditional print narratives to our cultures centuries ago.

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, M. M. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*. By Dorothy J. Hale. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006. 481-510. Print.
- Brick, Martin. "Reading the Book of Someone's Reading: Spatial Allegories of the Reading Experience in Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Gascoigne's *Master F.J.*" *The McNeese Review* 47 (2009): 1-17. *EBSCO*. Web. 21 May 2013.
- Bolter, J. David, and Richard A. Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000. Print.
- Carr, Nicholas G. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011. Print.
- Chaouli, Michel. "How Interactive Can Fiction Be?" *Critical Inquiry* 31.3 (2005): 599-617. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Mar. 2013.
- Di Leo, Jeffrey R. "The Culture of the Book--and Why It Must End." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 57.6 (2010): B8-B9. *EBSCO*. Web. 21 May 2013.
- Elias, J. Amy. "The Dialogical Avant-Garde: Relational Aesthetics and Time Ecologies in *Only Revolutions* and *TOC*." *Contemporary Literature* 53.4 (2012): 738-778. *Project MUSE*.
- Esslin, Astrid, and Alice Bell. "'Click=Kill': Textual You in Ludic Digital Fiction." *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Study* 4.1 (2012): 49-73. Project Muse. Web.
- Falco, Ed. "New Media and Time." *American Book Review* (2009): 21-22. Web.
- Friedberg, Anne. *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.
- Galey, Alan. "The Enkindling Reciter: E-Books in the Bibliographical Imagination." *Book History* 15.1 (2012): 210-247. *Project MUSE*.

Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011. Print.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2008. Print.

---. "The Future of Literature: Complex Surfaces of Electronic Texts and Print Books." *Collection Management* 31 (2007): 85-114. Web.

---. *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012. Print.

---. "Saving the Subject: Remediation in House of Leaves." *American Literature* 74.4 (2002): 779-806. *Project MUSE*. Web. 21 May 2013.

Iser, Wolfgang, Norman Holland, and Wayne Booth. "Interview: Wolfgang Iser." *Diacritics* 10.2 (1980): 57-74. Print.

Iser, Wolfgang. "The Implied Reader." *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*. By Dorothy J. Hale. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006. 763-78. Print.

---. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *New Literary History* 3.2 (1972): 279-99. Print.

Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2012. Print.

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002. Print.

Punday, Daniel. *Writing at the Limit: The Novel in the New Media Ecology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2012. Print.

Shanahan, John. "Digital Transcendentalism in David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas" *Criticism* (forthcoming). pg 1-31.

Todorov, Tzveton. "The Poetics of Prose." *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*. By Dorothy J. Hale. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2006. 205-18. Print

Tomasula, Steve, Stephen Farrell, Christian Jara, Matt Lavoy, and Maria Tomasula.
TOC. Tuscaloosa, Ala: University of Alabama, 2009. Print.