

Final Paper Assignment: Reading Electronic Literature

Final Paper Proposal

1-2 Pages

Due Tuesday, April 14th

Final Paper

7-10 Pages

Due Thursday, April 23rd by 4:00 pm in my mailbox, CL 501, and uploaded to SafeAssign

Print is the extreme phase of alphabet culture that detribalizes or decollectivizes man in the first instance. Print raises the visual features of alphabet to the highest intensity of definition. Thus print carries the individuating power of the phonetic alphabet much further than manuscript culture could ever do. Print is the technology of individualism. If men decided to modify this visual technology by an electronic technology, individualism will also be modified.

—Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*

The distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into the writer.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

Language alone is no longer the distinctive characteristic of technologically developed societies; rather, it is language plus code.

—N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer*

The twentieth century will be remembered as the last time there existed nonmedia.

—Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit*

Some of the most exciting trends in late-twentieth century literary criticism, influenced by the influx of poststructural theory, concerned the “death of the author.”¹ As we have seen, not only did such thinking have wide-reaching effects on postmodern literary production—visible in encyclopedic print novels like David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996)—early digital texts took up the radical thinking of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and many others to great effect. Writers like Shelley Jackson, Michael Joyce, Stuart Moulthrop, and Stephanie Strickland, heavily influenced by the cutting-edge advances made in humanities study and literary scholarship, mined this new theoretical terrain to produce their own experimental digital work. With early electronic literature, not only was the author dead, but something else had replaced whoever he or she was in the first place.

There is a certain way of understanding contemporary concerns, then, in terms of this twentieth century genealogy of challenging anthropocentrism and questioning the individual

Epigraphs drawn from Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 158; Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 232; N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 16; and Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 132.

¹ See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” (1968), in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-148; and for the most famous response to this essay, see Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” (1969), in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-138.

liberal subject. Indeed, the early twenty-first century has been increasingly dominated by an urgent need to think about *nonhuman* subjects. Some, like Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, suggest that there exists an *ontology* of networks, something like “*network being*, a *Dasein* specific to network phenomena.”² Other strands of contemporary thought, following the object oriented ontology of philosophers like Graham Harman, suggest that we should ascribe the same kind of relationship phenomenology has posited between subjects (humans) and objects—i.e., that subjects cannot ever ultimately fully *know* an object—to *all* objects.³ Others, like Jane Bennet, are even going so far as to think about the *politics* of matter.⁴ And perhaps the most nonhuman thinker of the present, Timothy Morton, suggests that in the age of what he calls “hyperobjects,” of objects so massively distributed in space and time so as to be unknowable and unthinkable, “nonhuman beings are responsible for the next moment in human history and thinking.”⁵

Considering how related but how far such thinking is from the “death of the author,” we might speculatively suggest that it is precisely *electronic literature* that is capable of revealing to us the radically nonhuman horizon of contemporaneity and the future. Not only have the twentieth and twenty-first centuries challenged traditional conceptions of human *poesis*, but the nonhuman world is increasingly viewed as capable of assemblage and emergence, as vibrant and vital, as *poetic*. In order to understand our present, surrounded by immense (and tiny) objects, by matter that seems to be expressive or affective, by disconcerting global networks that dwarf even Fredric Jameson’s vision of the technological sublime, perhaps we desperately *need* electronic literature.⁶ Its forms and processes, its challenging of reading, authorship, language, and meaning, and its various modes of making nonhuman processes and ontologies visible, provide a window on our hyperarchival present. In the age of hyperobjects and global risk, of big data and global climate change, we need new ways of seeing a world increasingly beyond our ken. Encountering objects where the line between human and nonhuman, subject and object, creator and created, author and reader can no longer be discerned may be more necessary now than we can possibly know.

So this is to say, for your final essay in Interactive Literature, I would like you to articulate a relatively ambitious *research project*. I would like you to do more than simply write an essay on a single work of electronic literature. As I hope I have briefly demonstrated, thinking about electronic literature allows a critic and scholar to confront large contemporary issues, and I would like to see you attempting to have *critical stakes* for your engagement with electronic literature, to have a *critical project* and *reason* to be reading the texts you are. Whether or not you find yourself interested in the nonhuman aspects of these texts or not—the above is merely a way of getting you thinking—hopefully you can see how looking at electronic literature might

² Galloway and Thacker, 118.

³ See Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002). *Tool-Being* is quite a difficult book, so for a more accessible introduction to object oriented ontology, see Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Washington, DC: Zero, 2010), esp. pp. 5-13 and 44-66.

⁴ Bennet’s thinking arises from thinking about objects and matter as vibrant and vital. See Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: The Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁵ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 201.

⁶ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), esp. pp. 37-38.

allow you to ask some important questions, and that you might undertake a project considerably more pronounced than simply writing a required essay for a grade. It is the gambit of this assignment that there is something vitally important about reading electronic literature, that it can potentially, as Strickland suggests, remold “our sensorium, our neuro-cognitive capabilities.”⁷

For your final essay I would like you to undertake a research project that you define, a research project on electronic literature whose primary aim will still be the close, careful, thoughtful analysis of how texts make meaning, but a project that also has clear critical stakes. We have approached our reading of interactive literature in a variety of ways this semester. We have read numerous critics and theorists alongside our reading of individual texts. We have closely and carefully read a variety of literary works in our class discussions. And we have frequently foregrounded history in how and why we might read. In short, this class has offered multiple ways of critically engaging with interactive literature, and the texts we have considered not only require of us a rigorous and multiplicitous approach to critical reading, but reward the variety of reading we have done. This paper is meant to function as a culmination of not only the class itself, but also the writing you have done throughout the semester. Beyond simply the major portion of your grade this final paper represents, it is also meant as a space for your individual interests in electronic literature to take shape and find an outlet. As such, other than the requirements listed below, I am leaving the particulars of what you choose to write about and (more-or-less) how you write about them up to you. *Of course you will still need to articulate a complex and clear argument for a specific interpretation of the works you are considering*, but, as you can clearly perceive, there are a *host* of interesting directions and approaches you may take with this paper and I look forward to seeing where you go.

Final Paper Requirements

Final Paper Proposal: Due Tuesday, April 14th. I would like you to hand in a brief proposal (1-2 pp.) of what you are going to write on. The paper proposal should include:

- 1) What *specific* aspects of electronic literature you are planning on writing about and *why*. How do you conceive of your research project? Why are you undertaking it?
- 2) A brief outline of the issues you are interested in investigating.
- 3) Your thesis/argument (which can still be exploratory in nature).
- 4) A bibliography of what texts, critical articles, and other sources you are planning on investigating. Your bibliography should be thorough and correctly formatted. Doing research for this essay at the last minute will not be in your interest, so this proposal should clearly reflect that you have already done considerable research on your topic.

You do not need to stick to the letter of your proposal for your final paper, and may find it differs dramatically, but the proposal is intended as a way of doing some of the legwork necessary for your final paper before you write it.

⁷ Stephanie Strickland, “Quantum Poetics: Six Thoughts,” in *Media Poetry: An International Anthology*, ed. Eduardo Kac (Chicago: Intellect, 2007), 25.

Final Paper: 7-10 pages, due Thursday, April 23rd by 4:00 pm in my mailbox in room 501 of the Cathedral of Learning. The final paper is meant as both a synthesis and culmination of the work you've done in Interactive Literature. The requirements are:

Close Reading/Thinking Digital. Unavoidably, whatever you are writing on will incorporate close, careful attention to the text itself, analyzing its forms and structures, its processes and procedures, its images and mechanics, and, of course, engaging carefully and rigorously with its content. In short, you should primarily think of the work you are doing as *interpretation*. Electronic literature offers *many* paths for close, careful engagement, so the more specific your approach is, the more complex your reading will be.

Breadth. Whatever you choose to write on, your essay must engage substantially with *at least two* works of electronic literature. Students are highly encouraged to work on *at least one* text that we have not covered in class. This requirement should indicate that I am thinking about this final paper less as a critical essay on a single text and more as a *research project*, an attempt to work through a general issue, concern, aspect, or tendency of electronic literature that interests you. Students are highly encouraged to think about the social, cultural, historical, political, or technological contexts of the works they are investigating.

Theory, Criticism, and Research. There are two parts of this requirement. First, you must engage with *at least one* of the critical or theoretical essays we have read this semester. We have read a variety of important criticism and theory on electronic literature—indeed, some of the most significant work in the field—so I would like to see that your work is clearly and *rigorously* informed by the critical conversation this course has introduced you to.

Second, you are required to have *at least two* outside sources informing your work. These sources *must*, without exception, have been *originally* published in an academic journal or book (i.e., *not the internet*), but you are welcome to use purely internet sources in addition to these sources. (Indeed, there are many such sources, given our subject matter.) There is really *quite* a bit of interesting criticism on electronic literature, as it has been an emerging, vibrant, and exciting field of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century literary scholarship, and I want you to engage with some of this conversation.⁸ You may also want to look at interviews with authors or reviews of their work, and also pay attention to various author's own criticism (e.g., Stephanie Strickland is a substantial critic in her own right), as these texts may be helpful as well.

Research can be pretty fun (I swear). Let this be a chance for you to really delve into the library and scour the available digital archives. If you are having trouble finding sources, *do not hesitate to ask a librarian for help*. Librarians are there to field your questions and they are an incredibly useful resource. Also, PittCat is very

⁸ If you are struggling to find sources just look at the endnotes to chapter 1, "Electronic Literature: What Is It?" of N. Katherine Hayles's *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 187-196. Hayles's is incredibly erudite, rigorous, and well-read on the subject, and it comes out clearly in the notes. Indeed, this might be the best place to begin when you start going about your research.

useful in helping you find critical essays, and will link you to sites like J-STOR, Project Muse, and Academic-Lexis Nexus, all of which have many essays on electronic literature that originally appeared in academic journals. (These are all general databases that can be found under: ULS Homepage → Databases → By Title.) And of course, go to the shelves in the library where there are a variety of important books on electronic literature. Looking through the critical books on electronic literature could help you enormously, and often the best happy accidents of research comes through finding something in the stacks that one was not anticipating.

You should keep in mind that I will be considering *what* you find and use, along with *how* you use it, when considering your grade. Students will not be penalized for the “bare minimum” of sources, but showing that you have done careful and thoughtful research into your topic will greatly benefit you. For a research project such as this one, I cannot stress this latter point enough.

Regarding research: it can be quite tempting to simply ape another critic’s reading of a text by simply rephrasing their thinking in your own words. This final paper expects that you go *considerably* beyond this and that you use the work of other critics and scholars writing about electronic literature as material to rigorously and complexly work with and against. Basically, your research will introduce you to a conversation that is already going on. I am asking you to participate in that conversation rather than just repeat what other people have already said.

Other than that, where you go is up to you.

As always, I am more than available to talk to during the composition of this final paper. You have nearly a month to think about and write this paper, so please feel free to schedule an appointment with me or email me to discuss your ideas. Also, feel free to talk with me about finding and thinking about material. Databases are always helpful, but it can be nice to plumb an actual human’s archive when going about this type of work, especially considering how I myself have been doing research into electronic literature recently. I am beginning to amass quite the library of .pdfs, many on texts we have covered in class, so please feel free to ask me for digital copies of things you might want to look at.