

## Conference Review: *Reading Digital Literature* at Brown University, October 4-7, 2007.

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### Abstract

This is a review of the conference, *Reading Digital Literature* at Brown University, organized by Roberto Simanowski (Brown University and *Dichtung Digital*) October 4-7, 2007.

## Close Reading in the Realm of Static and Dynamic Texts

Review of *Reading Digital Literature* at Brown University, organized by Roberto Simanowski (Brown University and *Dichtung Digital*) October 4-7, 2007. 1

One often approaches paper-based texts as unified, stable with little to no self-generative properties. Such texts are objects and characterized by a linear structure, which can be traced to a single author. We think of texts that mirror meaning through the stylistic and rhetorical devices as well as through all nuances and connotations of language its author uses. We pay attention to the vocabulary, construction, grammar, imagery and symbolism the author applies to his text, and we carefully read through these texts with the aim of noting all the striking features that the text manifests, noting also relationships of textual elements that point at things outside of the text. We do this with a physical marker, underlining significant text passages and annotating comments *on* the text, namely *on* the page the text is written (and therefore tangible). By following an author's reasoning inductively we conduct observations and interpretations which we want to prove in the text, and we can do so by pointing directly to the relevant passage. In short, before considering other analytical possibilities, we start a close reading by taking into account the stylistic, linguistic, semantic, structural and cultural properties of a text. 2

What can we refer to in texts that are produced within programmable media that do not incorporate a narrated unified property, texts that move and morph, that change by mouse-over or are altered randomly by the computer-program itself? How can we conduct a close reading of literature that is displayed on intangible screens such as installations, or literature that isn't even symbolized by visible alphabetical characters and that merges different media seamlessly? For authors like Daniel Howe, digital literature is meant to augment the "writing process" via digital/procedural processes;<sup>[1]</sup> for the reader this augmentation renders almost palpable the need for new reading strategies. New reading strategies require a broadening of the close reading concept that applies to traditional texts. 3

Close reading literature that is produced within programmable media implies more than close reading. It means to look beyond the surface, beyond the visible written word, it means to examine the complex production processes that operate within a work of digital literature accompanied, for example, by animated or machine-generated random words that alter signification. And since writing itself is technology, the writing technology (software, programming) of digital texts needs to be examined; that is, how the code affects a piece of digital literature. The code that underlies a work of digital literature is meaning-making and therefore not to be underestimated in the critical analysis that goes along with a close scholarly reading of digital literature. Tools of literary criticism need to be reconfigured towards an elaborated interdisciplinary perspective emphasizing media studies and evaluation of programming effects in digital literature.<sup>[2]</sup> Stating this isn't meant to transform the critic into a critical software engineer; I do think, however, that a critic who is 4

writing an elaborated critique of a digital work should bring to bear at least simple “code grammar” knowledge “and be acquainted with some of the structures and strategies that underlie software engineering in any programming language” [Murray 1995].

## Reading Digital Literature

Aiming at bringing ten scholars and practitioners together to undertake close readings of digital literature in order to “advance the field of digital literature and digital humanities”, to entail the “understanding of the language of digital media” and to develop “reading competence” in the realm of digital literature, media and art, Roberto Simanowski’s opening words to the conference *Reading Digital Literature* might still echo in participants’ minds, reminding them that “[T]his is a special moment in the history of digital literature” [Simanowski 2007]. N. Katherine Hayles amplified Simanowski’s sentiment by calling on conference participants “to move away from highly generalized accounts into detailed and specific readings that account, in media-specific ways, for the practices, effects, and interpretations of important works” (quoted in [Simanowski 2007]).

Simanowski and Hayles’s remarks call to mind earlier discussions between scholars and practitioners of digital art and literature who already tried to draw our attention to the development of a new digital literacy. In 2002, for example, the Electronic Literature Organization’s symposium on the *State of the Arts* discussed “Multimedia Criticism”, exploring the role of multimedia techniques in critical writing. Nevertheless, the event this October at Brown University for the first time focused on close readings of digital literature presented within a conference format that permitted time for immediate discussions and follow-ups. Simanowski had a useful approach: each of the ten presentations was followed by a comment provided by another presenter. Through this intersection, two perspectives on the same topic were presented. Additionally, the commentary served as an opener for each discussion, and participants, presenters and conference guests alike engaged in numerous constructive dialogues, exchanging views and arguments in the moderated debates that were mostly too short in time (as frequently happens at conferences).

The three-day conference that opened at Brown’s List Arts Center, exhibiting three installations of digital literature (Daniel Howe’s *Text Curtain*, Aya Karpinska’s *For This We Pray* and John Cayley’s *Imposition*), had much to offer and mirrored Simanowski’s aim of bringing together practitioners and artists shifting between co-events like public screenings, digital writing performances of Brown-affiliated authors and the conference itself. The conference ended with a “brainstorming lunch” after a lively discussion among scholars of the humanities departments and experts from the electronic writing programs who exchanged ideas on how meaning is being generated in works of digital literature by discussing aesthetic effects the artist produces with code.

The conference papers were presented by widely-known researchers, some among them recognized for their pioneering studies in the field of digital literature: Chris Funkhouser, Peter Gendolla, N. Katherine Hayles, Fotis Jannidis, Rita Raley, Francisco Ricardo, Jürgen Schäfer, Thomas Swiss, Karin Wenz and Mark Tribe. Their papers presented close readings of works that included the interactive drama Michael Mateas’ and Andrew Stern’s *Façade*, the computer game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R., Slippingglimpse* by Stephanie Strickland and Cynthia Jaramillo, the installations *Text Rain* (Camille Utterback, Romy Achituv), and *Listening Post* (Mark Hansen, Ben Rubin), Thomas Swiss’ three versions of his collaborative work *Blind Side of a Secret*, the Hypertext *The Demon Machine* (Esther Hunziker, Felix Zbinden), and presentations on Poetry Machines like Christopher Strachey’s *Love Letter Generator* and *Syntext* that refers to the poetry of Text Generators. The conference explored a wide range of works of digital literature that were for the first time presented and discussed with a close reading.

Posing the difficult questions over the appropriate reading methods through which digital literature should be approached, and asking how to read a digital sign, Simanowski initiated the discussion on how to develop a digital literacy that “develops by exploring the semiotics of the technical effects in digital media” [Simanowski 2007]. To my mind, the question of *how* to read digital literature forces scholars not only to develop a reading competence for advancing the understanding of works but also to evolve substantial and illustrative techniques for an adequate criticism in the field of “literary digital studies”. Taking into account what the conference was aiming for, this article addresses problems of close reading *digital* literature and reviews an exemplary method of a close reading that Rita Raley

presented, “reading” *List(en)ing Post*.

## Close Reading Techniques

A good point of departure is to discuss the meaning of “close reading” in its conventional sense when applied to traditional literature.<sup>[3]</sup> This procedure is justified because we are facing a new and rather young form of literature that has not yet developed its own theory of reading. Today we find ourselves faced with manipulated texts that reorder the structure of reading through the use of programmable media. Digital literature that is distributed by computerized media is in need of a reading theory that takes into account the changes the digital environment causes with all its consequences, presenting: “eventilized texts” (Hayles, quoted in [Simanowski 2007]), kinetic texts, algorithmic interpolations, machine-based randomly recombined and generated texts, plays with legibility, video and animated flash-poems, interactive narratives and games, hypertext and hyperfictions, writing in immersive virtual reality, and installations. These alter the readers’ reception and also transform aspects of *literariness* in the works, as well. It is not far-fetched to claim that we should move away from traditional literary studies that focus on static text, broadening our theories to encompass “digital literary studies” and preparing them to address literature that is born-digital. This claim, however, does not mean that we should neglect literary studies which will always serve as a starting point of any discussion of digital literature — for its theories will always serve as a touchstone for further critical studies — but that we should allow our bearings to adjust to the medium at hand.<sup>[4]</sup>

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## Considering Reading Strategies

The conference *Reading Digital Literature* that brought together scholars from different scientific fields also explored diverse reading strategies and perspectives that enriched the possible approaches of reading digital literature. What will follow before I present a “close reading review” of Rita Raley’s presentation on *Listening Post* is a summary of the approaches that were undertaken by the presenters that aims to find common ground and focuses on the main reading methods used.

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There is a diversity of approaches when undertaking a close reading. Jörgen Schäfer drew out the Aristotelian theory of drama that underlies the interactive drama *Façade*, exploring the hybridization of the literary genre from the perspective of literary and performance studies. Another course of studies followed Fotis Jannidis invoked elements of pop culture when analyzing the computer game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* in relation to the paradigms of the ego-shooter genre. He contributed a hermeneutics of this art. Art itself was questioned. Mark Tribe discussed the Flash work of Young-Hae Chang *Heavy Industries* one of whose recent works, *The Art of Sleep*, draws out various tendencies in digital art and the contemporary art world generally, and takes on central issues concerning the futility of art and the difficulty of defining it. Raley commented on Tribe’s presentation, pointing out that taking the “art question” seriously is “always lethal”. She read Tribe’s presentation as highlighting the absence of signature aspects of Chang’s work, wondering if this were “partly to do with limitations of Flash (kinetic text), which introduces a tension between contemplation and distraction”. Actually, Tribe himself drew our attention to the software that Young-Hae Chang *Heavy Industries* used: Flash. He explained how this software could be used creatively but without any reference to what happens to the reader or the viewer of Chang’s *Bust Down the Doors!* and *The Art of Sleep*.

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The question of what happens to the reader when evaluating the repercussions on her of the literary work was barely acknowledged in the close readings of the presenters. Peter Gendolla who reminded us of the traditional functions that literature used to provide by examining Christopher Strachey’s *Love Letter Generator*, contrasting it with traditional poetry, and thereby attempting to ascertain whether in this way it is possible either to isolate or to retrieve the literary process.

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Literariness is a crucial point to take into account in connection with generated literature. Is any literariness remarkable? Chris Funkhouser presented poetry outcomes from *Syntext*, a collection of fifteen computer programs from the 70s, 80s, and 90s that automatically generate various styles of poetry in DOS. His method and procedure are worth noting since he reported on the inner workings of the machine as well as on the outcomes, analyzing the generated poetry similarly to the methods applied to close readings in traditional literature by commenting on, for example, syntax and structure.

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Thus, this again was an approach that resulted in the confrontation of both the literary- and the machine-generated literature.

Integrating this perspective with the view on the coding and programming possibilities was a skilled approach that applied to Hayles's call to process "media-specific" readings. Karin Wenz's analysis of the hypertextual work, *The demon machine or 80 ways to face a demon*, offered a close reading of the interface and its multi-medial dimensions. Wenz's close reading approach was "media-specific", but her analysis lacked focus on the literariness that is applied to the piece (even though there are more videos and images than text implemented in the hypertext). The presentation was perhaps overly centered on the interface following both a highly descriptive and detailed explanation of the work's structure, but it was not a close reading of the literature or narrative itself. Another close reading that scratched the surface of what "close reading" might be was Thomas Swiss's "personal alphabet". Swiss claimed that he "shies away" from methods. Instead, he wrote in the manner of a piece of digital literature itself: with surprising surrealistic turns and remarks on Roland Barthes, Jonathan Culler and responses to proper questions of criticism or critique, elaborating a responsive nonlinear paper.

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What was once again missing from this? Attention to the literary work that Swiss was addressing, namely a poem that had been transposed into three versions of digital literature. What was the poem about?! I close this general overview with N. Katherine Hayles' and Francisco Ricardo's close reading methods and then give a "close reading review" of Rita Raley's *List(en)ing Post* presentation.

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Hayles's close reading was rich in its applied methods, both reading and contextualizing the form, content and structure of Strickland and Lawson Jaramillo's *Slippingglimpse*, and bringing these elements into relation with each other by approaching the reading along "three major axes of interpretation". Hayles offers a way to read this work, taking into account the "inner workings" and the algorithms of the piece, she is spelling out how the machine "reads" the text, the poem that underlies the digital artwork that includes video, images and a kinetic text. By detailed explanations of how the intended programming interplays with the meaning, Hayles gives a very close reading of the work that serves as an example "what reading might mean in digital media".

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Similarly concerned with the connection between text, and visual patterns, Ricardo's presentation of the installation *Text Rain* refers to "literature as a genre of text wrapped in a mantle of imagery". Here, he offers a reading of the "discursive spaces" of the "transmodal" work *Text Rain* by drawing a distinction over the "de-modalization" that characterizes "pure literature" and framing the relation of imagery and literature within historic, ontological and philosophical perspectives that mirror the longstanding "tension in relating word to image within the literary experience". Thus, his close reading manifests through drawing attention to the larger "écriture" of the works' literary space. And here, like Swiss and Hayles, he considers aims that criticism might and might not bear, approaching the reading of the piece in Sontag's manner, against interpretation.

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Swiss, Hayles and Ricardo exhibit a common ground in methodological approaches: they refer back to traditional generic concepts and confront traditional literature with the outcomes of the digital (Schäfer, Gendolla, Funkhouser, Raley). Others frame a work within another realm of digital art and culture (Jannidis, Wenz, Tribe, Raley). Swiss, Hayles and Ricardo also discuss the methodology of a close reading. Additionally, some of the close readings referred to the code and algorithm that underlies a work (Funkhouser, Tribe, Raley, Hayles) which is worth noting since the code is, in my view, a crucial instrument of meaning making in digital literature. Thus, I have chosen Rita Raley's close reading presentation on *Listening Post*.

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## Close Reading Raley's *List(en)ing Post*

It is remarkable that Rita Raley's presentation at the conference is simply titled with the work it refers to: *Listening Post*. And this and nothing else is what Raley deals with, offering a close and specific reading of the installation by commenting on aesthetic aspects. *Listening Post*'s literary value, by discussing form, structure and content and last but not least by drawing analogies to the realm of digital culture. Even though Raley doesn't present specific insights to the tools of software that were used (written with/in Perl, using C, Max/MSP, C++, sh/tcsh, R) she brings up general information on the "inner workings" of the machines that control the output by describing the effects of the installation's

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algorithm. The analytical insights that she did bring to bear were, however, ample, and necessary for the better understanding what *Listening Post* is and what happens while the installation is processing. Here, it is probably not essential to know more about the specific programming code. In *Listening Post* the installation itself and its output bear the meaning — arguably, more so than the code. What happens visibly and aurally is essential. The software used and its programming serve, in this case, as a means to underpin the meanings Hansen and Rubin intended to generate, that is to *capture the moments of human connection* [Reas 2007].<sup>[5]</sup>

There is a distinction in analysing the interplay of content-intention, form and structure. Other works of digital literature might project a meaning into a specific code performance; in *Listening Post* it seems like the tools are, as mentioned, aids in performing a meaning that does not lie in the code itself. Raley is successful in presenting the artist's transferred meaning, outlining the project's significance that is derived amongst other instances from "its virtuoso technique" and its literary value that "allows us to encounter a social totality in all of its complexity (...)". Her close reading technique is detailed but differs (of course) from reading techniques that refer to print-based texts. However, she proceeds conscientiously, inductively, reporting on the seven cycles the installation traverses, describing the applying arrangements that refer to visual, aural and musical levels. Raley reflects on the cycles meanings, their effects, keeping in mind the "viewer", not the "reader", who experiences textual upheavals, a-semantics, illegibility, words that are sounded out by the *Listening Post*'s text-to-speech engine that treats abbreviations and acronyms as words that "one has to move in to isolate a single display to read". The experiences Raley evokes from the installation allow her to allude to other works of visual and literary art (indicating Gibson's cyberspace, Pynchon's circuit card and the circuitry in the film *13th Floor*, Mark Lombardi and Chris Jordan, as well as media artists that deal with surveillance). Raley takes note of another aspect of *Listening Post*: the organization of information on PowerPoint slides, lists that allude to "the interplay between the individual and the cumulative whole". She points out that *Listening Post* brings such lists into some form of relation and synthesis with the "long-term tradition of literary lists" that are used to produce aesthetic effects.

On the whole, Raley is successful in her close reading thanks to the interdisciplinary approach she has chosen, moving back and forth between related themes, outlining observations made in the realm of digital culture and always returning to the reading of the work itself: *Listening Post*.

What one might derive from the whole conference is that there is still a need for an elaborated methodology of close reading. The approaches were as different as the works of digital literature that were discussed, even though it is possible to categorize them all in a summary way. The central problem of theorizing the close reading of digital literature is the diversity of digital literature. Each work uses distinct software environments, different multi-medial devices, programming methods, and algorithmic strategies, as well as distinct varieties of interplay with text. This makes it difficult to maintain *the* theory since it would have to combine disciplinary perspectives which should apply to the heterogeneity of a work. Criticism of digital literature will always be diverse because the object of its focus is, as we have argued, inherently diverse. Having said this, there are three themes that should remain consistent in a critical examination: The question of what is literary; a focus on its underlying code that affects digital literature; and Hayles's proposed "media-specific" analysis.

## Notes

[1] This is a comment taken from the conference booklet. Roberto Simanowski asked each participant to submit statements to the following questions: This aspect of digital literature excites me most; This aspect of digital literature bothers me most; My favorite work of digital literature; My favorite work of non-digital art. The statements mirror manifold insights and can be read here: <http://www.interfictions.org/readingdigitalliterature>.

[2] See also Peterson 2006.

[3] Interesting insights into what "close reading" might mean are given by Jan van Looy and Jan Baetens in their introduction to "Close Reading New Media: Analyzing Electronic Literature", discussing the relationship of "close" and "reading" [Baetens 2003].

[4] Simanowski proposes a shift from hermeneutics of linguistic signs to a hermeneutic of intermedial, interactive, and processing signs,

suggesting to undertake the discussion on digital literature by combining new and old criteria of literary theory.

[5] Even though it might be clear that another program construction/performance could make a difference when keeping the developments of ideas, its rejections and realizations in mind: Hansen and Rubin give interesting insights into the project's "making of" in an interview with Casey Reas and Ben Fry [Reas 2007].

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