

Digital Literature and the Modernist Problem

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Abstract

What is the status of digital literature in contemporary culture? Many scholars and practitioners assume that digital literature constitutes a contemporary avant-garde, which does its work of experimentation outside or in opposition to the mainstream. The notion of the avant-garde might seem thoroughly out of date in a consideration of the digital future. Important theorists (e.g. Huyssen, Drucker) have argued that the avant-garde is no longer viable even for traditional media and art practices. On the other hand, the avant-gardes of twentieth-century modernism made claims about the function of art that remain surprisingly influential today – within the art community and within popular culture. As Peter Bürger and others have discussed, an important division grew up in modernism on the question of whether art should strive for formal innovation or for sociopolitical change. Avant-gardes of the twentieth century took up positions along a spectrum from pure formalism (e.g. the Abstract Expressionists) to overt political action (e.g. the Situationists). While the digital literature community is in general committed to formal innovation, some are critical of this commitment, in part on the political grounds that (technological) innovation has become a byword for the digital culture industry. Although the modernist problem is still apparent in some digital art and digital literature today, writers such as Jason Nelson seem to be moving beyond that dialectic.

Introduction

In the last twenty years, digital literature has moved from the early days of the hypertext movement (and beyond that early text generators) and has developed a wide range of new forms, including hypermedia works, codeworks, flash poetry, and digitally mediated literary performance. Although writers in the past decade have generally abandoned the original hypertextual format (consisting of fixed texts and static links) for more dynamic forms, the cultural status of digital literature has not changed since those early days. Despite the efforts of N. Katherine Hayles and others, the general literary and academic communities continue largely to ignore digital literature. These communities still regard the static page, or its digitized counterparts, as the only literary medium. An opinion piece in the *New York Times Book Review* by Laura Miller summed up their reaction over a decade ago in its very title, “www.claptrap.com” (March 15, 1998), and there is no evidence that the opinion has changed, as a recent Guardian article indicated [Gallix 2008]. It is true that e-books are gaining rapid acceptance, and in a few years electronic formats may begin to rival print as a presentation channel. In their wake, an interesting discussion on reading takes center stage in broader public debates.

[1] E-books, however, simply offer readers a convenient new format for storing and consuming electronic pages of text.

[2] If born-digital works distinguish themselves by disrupting the static page in various ways, we must acknowledge that this disruption has not resonated with the larger literary community.^[3] In this respect digital art (works that address the visual arts community and tradition) has had more success, because it fits more easily into the trajectories of art since the 1960s. For example, the transition between the installation art of the 1970s and 1980s and digital installation art is fairly obvious. In literary studies, however, critics often assume that digital literature has not yet produced works that are serious or deemed good enough to warrant closer scrutiny. While these scholars may recognize the experimental tradition in which much of digital literature operates, they position digital literature so far outside the mainstream that its place in the literary circle is in doubt.

Many creators of digital literature would acknowledge that their work is experimental, and they might implicitly or even explicitly accept the label *avant-garde*. Because of the indifference or hostility of the literary community, the decision itself to produce a work for digital presentation becomes for some writers an act of opposition to the mainstream.^[4] That opposition was clearly expressed in the early days of the hypertext movement and continues to be prevalent among artists and writers. In an article in the *New York Times Book Review* (June 21, 1992) entitled “The End of Books,” Robert Coover was being deliberately provocative, but not entirely ironic, when he claimed that digital technology and hypertext in particular would mean the end of the novel: “... freedom from the tyranny of the line [the linear narrative of the printed novel] is perceived as only really possible now at last with the advent of hypertext, written and read on the computer, where the line in fact does not exist unless one invents and implants it in the text” [Coover 1992]. Coover’s article was an attempt to compel the literary community to recognize the importance of the digital as a new and very different literary medium. Coover failed to convince his fellow writers of the value of this early digital literary form, but he did establish a tone of opposition that is still assumed today. Critics continue to explore the impact of digital technology on the cultural position of literature, as did recently John Zuern, arguing that digital literature, as a field has “been compelled to define *literature* in ways that counter deeply entrenched presuppositions ...[i.e.] the dominance of print-based conceptions of literary production” [Zuern 2009]. Whether the author of a born digital work intends it or not, the fact that the work is digital (and not printed) is still unfamiliar for the reader of literature — as opposed to, say, an online paper.

Historical Avant-garde

The notion of the *avant-garde* and even the term *avant-garde* have become at the same time popular and, for art critics like Johanna Drucker, are somewhat embarrassing in our current cultural rhetoric. The explanation for this ambivalent reaction lies in the importance of the *avant-garde* in the history of twentieth-century art. The *avant-garde* movements and figures from the futurists to the American abstract expressionist, Fluxus artists, and Situationists seem to define the modernist impulse, while modernism itself is the central project of twentieth-century culture. We acknowledge the modernism and the *avant-garde* are not the same thing. For our purposes here, we will take the *avant-garde* in the 20th century to be the leading or radical version of the modernist project. The *avant-garde* shows most clearly what we are calling the *modernist problem*, which in fact characterizes all the cultural work and art of the modern period. Critics of digital literature often draw comparisons between digital literary works and practitioners and the early *avant-garde* and the neo-*avant-garde* of the concretists, Oulipo, and language poetry. Such an affiliation has been explored by, e.g. [Rettberg 2008] and [Wardrip-Fruin 2009]. Others, such as [Pressman 2008], have looked beyond the closest resemblances between procedural composition in digital media for literary purposes and historical forbears, to investigate instead the general “newness” of such artists as Young Hae Change Heavy Industries with references to Poundian modernist experimentation.

We can begin by distinguishing two aspects of *avant-garde* practice in the twentieth century: the formal and the political. In formal terms, the *avant-garde* strives for radical change in the practice of their art. In painting, for example, the formal *avant-garde* could be said to begin with Manet and the Impressionists. In writing, we could locate this disruption with modernist writers such as James Joyce, or, with Dadaists or Italian futurists. According to Clement Greenberg, the trend of formal opposition in painting culminated with the (American) abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, whose work frankly acknowledged the flatness of the painted canvas. Greenberg was an articulate spokesperson for medium-specificity in art, claiming that each artistic medium has its own intrinsic qualities that distinguish it from all other mediums. Although he later denounced his own definition, Greenberg initially argued that “the essence of Modernism lies ... in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” [Greenberg 1960]. The task of the artist is then to explore those qualities. Greenberg’s *avant-garde*, therefore, is formalist, revolutionizing the materials or practices of one particular art. The formalist argument is frequent in digital literary criticism as well, perhaps most prominently in Hayles’s notion of medium-specific analysis. We find the argument recently articulated in Raine Koskimaa’s essay:

All cybertextual works are in a very concrete sense experimental writing. First of all, the authors are experimenting with the new media, trying to find out what is possible in digital textuality, what are

the limits of literary expression in programmable media. This is a question not so much of experimenting to break established conventions, as of experimenting *in an attempt to create new conventions*. Since the new digital technology plays such a crucial role in cybertextuality, we may call the works in this emerging field as “technological avant-garde.” [Koskimaa 2010, 127]

Here, Koskimaa identifies digital technology as the medium-specific essence of this new literature. What he calls the “technological avant-garde,” we are suggesting falls under the category of the formal avant-garde.

Other theorists, such as Peter Bürger, focus on the political dimension of the avant-garde: its principal aim is not to define an artistic medium, but rather to reform society itself through a new kind of art. Russian artists in the 1920s constituted a political avant-garde (until the Soviet state turned against them), because they wanted to contribute through their art to the re-education of the people to the communist way of life. Bürger’s classic example of the political avant-garde was Dada, which had no coherent program like the Russian communists, but whose purpose was to reinvent art in the age of technoculture (one that is not medium-specific). It was in part the horrors of World War I that led the Dadaists to the conviction that the relationship between art and life must change. Although called “political,” the impulse to reform in the historical avant-garde went beyond politics in the narrow sense to embrace a transformation of social and human relations. As Bürger puts it, “What distinguishes [the avant-garde] is the attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art” [Bürger 1984, 49].

We are not suggesting that Bürger provided the last word on the avant-garde. Hal Foster and others have questioned Bürger’s assertion that the avant-garde was limited to one historical moment in the early twentieth century; they contend that artists in the 1950s and 1960s were also avant-garde or neo-avant-garde [Foster 1996]. Bürger did, however, frame the subsequent debate on whether the avant-garde was still possible. That debate has still not been put entirely to rest, despite, or indeed because of, Johanna Drucker’s *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* [Drucker 2005], in which she argues that academic art theory, which still invokes the rhetoric of the avant-garde, is hopelessly out of date. By contrast, Jacques Rancière attempts to recast the history of art to show how the avant-garde can be rethought as a particular kind of attention given to the relationship between art and society. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière addresses the question of the relationship of art and political action in the modern era [Rancière 2004], and for Rancière that era extends further back – to the beginning of the 19th century, when European culture began to understand art as a special category of human endeavor. Within this general definition of modern aesthetics, Rancière distinguishes two kinds of political aesthetics. One is the insistence that art has no boundaries, which leads not only to what Bürger and others think of as the radical political avant-garde of the Dadaists and Futurists, but also to those modernists such as the Werkbund and the Bauhaus, who wanted to make art and design contribute to an aesthetic reimagining for modern society. The other political aesthetics is one that emphasizes the autonomy and separateness of art from the everyday and from the conventional notion of politics itself. For Rancière, Adorno represents this aesthetics, because Adorno asserts that art can have a political function precisely by maintaining its distance from conventional political and social engagement. This second political aesthetics is not the same as formalism, but it does seem to accommodate the kind of formalist agenda put forward by Greenberg. In fact, Rancière’s definition of the aesthetic regime is that “it strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres ... It simultaneously established the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself” [Rancière 2004, 23]. The self-identification of art with its forms would seem to be a formal effect that occurs at the level of the artist’s and audience’s engagement with the work of art. It would seem to be exactly what Picasso or Pollock do in their paintings by disrupting traditional illusionistic representation. Rancière argues that critical art (throughout the 20th century and perhaps today) should function by exploiting a tension between these two aesthetic positions: between an aesthetics that dissolves art into life and one that insists on art’s distinct and autonomous function. This call for a “third way” gives us a new perspective on the classic division between political and formal modernism, and we will return to this perspective below.

The historical avant-garde and by extension all of modern art and design have left us with this question: what is the relationship between formal innovation and political action? The recent work of Rancière does not settle this question, but rather shows that it is still relevant. The modernist problem that we have inherited is to decide whether and how art matters for our culture and society. Is art simply a joyful engagement with forms, as Drucker seems to suggest, or

should it lead us to a new life praxis, as Bürger's political avant-garde insist? Does it lead to a new way of living *through* formal innovation? In this vein, Simanowski argues, building on Alan Liu's discussion on information cool, that "formalism ... itself is a culture-critical statement (as it was a century ago with respect to classical avant-garde)" [Ricardo & Simanowski 2009]. The notion that radical formal innovation is itself political would be a solution to the modernist problem in one stroke, because it would bring together the two defining aspects of the avant-garde in the twentieth century. The American abstract expressionists or, say, James Joyce would become political artists.

Digital Literature as Formal Avant-garde

It is easy to find examples of digital literary works that explore visually and verbally experimental techniques that break with literary conventions (whether produced in print or in digitized form) in order to interrogate the nature of literary writing. The question we pose, with other critics, is whether those experimentations should be deemed to be in the avant-garde or modernist tradition. If we accept, as many do, that digital literary practices seek to innovate, what is it that they innovate? A formal literary avant-garde is looking to identify and explore the formal essence of the medium. There are two interpretations of what constitutes the site of experimentation in digital literature. In one view, programmable technology is the medium of digital literary works. The other view is that the medium remains writing itself. Furthermore, we are talking about different affiliations of the avant-garde to the digital literary. The avant-garde in digital literature can be a question of artists and writers explicitly citing, borrowing, or otherwise drawing upon antecedents, as many have suggested ([Pressman 2008], [Rettberg 2008]). Conversely, even when the artist does not make explicit reference to the avant-garde, critics may label an artist's work as avant-garde for formal properties or institutional reasons.

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While we cannot explore all of the complexities of the socio-cultural position of digital literature, we would like to look at two instances of digital literary practice in which the avant-garde figures as a concept.

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The first example foregrounds the interface and visual aspect of the work — what we can call the graphical connection. One of the best known visual poems in digital form, Brian Kim Stefans's *The Dream-Life of Letters* [Stefans 2000], is clearly positioned as formally experimental or avant-garde. A formidable exercise in animated letters and kinetic layout, the work uses Flash to explore visual and animated gestures of text that intermittently form words to read, but just as often engage in the letters' kinetic and visual symbolic meanings. In the accompanying text, Stefans explains the work's inception in his original static text poem, which in itself was an answer to a text by Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Stefans notes that the static poem looked like "as [if] it was in a sort of antique 'concrete' mode, [and] it resembled a much older aesthetic, one well explored by Gomringer, the De Campos brothers and ... so it wasn't very interesting to me" [Stefans 2000]. Stefans's invocation of the concrete poets of the 1950s and 60s clearly situates the poem's historical roots in the literary avant-garde and the concretists' exploration with the visual, but this is coupled with a curious sentiment that he needs to move "beyond" the constraints of their paper-based visual layout experiments. Thus, Stefans's Flash poem, in its animated "concrete" aesthetic and poetic style, seems to complete the tradition of concrete poetry. He seems to have sought out the ultimate goal of their aesthetic "dream" of letters that words should be "set free" from their static prison on the printed page and that their metaphoric freedom through experimental visual layout should and could be realized in digital media. We will leave aside the question of whether the concretists actually intended or wished for letters to reach such a "completion." In any case, Stefans's intention seems to be to insert his poem into an avant-garde tradition and to explore the possibilities of digital forms as a continuation of a concretist aesthetic.

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In addition, *Dream-Life* belongs to a group of short, non-interactive Flash poems that enjoyed a brief period of attention in the early 2000s. Such visual, kinetic poems, including most of those found on sites such as Poemsthatgo.com, locate the essence of the medium in the visible interface, which is, often, facilitated through the Flash software. Such poems make particular use of Flash features such as tweening and morphing to put letters and words into elaborate motion, and they often combine images and sound with these textual animations. As an example of formalist avant-garde, then, Stefans's *The Dream-Life of Letters* foregrounds the author's process of experimentation with his or her chosen material, Flash, but also underscores the continuation of a concretist preoccupation with the visual symbolism of letters.

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Our second example, codework, also seems to concern animation of letters, but as we shall see codework's visual and

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kinetic constructions are linked to a different articulation of artistic and literary avant-garde practice. Codework constitutes an important direction within digital literature. Like Flash poetry, codework poetry is committed to formal experiment, but codework poetry understands the essence of the digital on very different terms. Whereas the concretist “Dreamlife of Letters” uses programmable media to explore visual and kinetic meaning at the interface level, the meaning of codeworks is not to be found merely on the level of the interface, but relates instead to the coded processes that lie beneath.

Rita Raley defines a *codework* as “a text-object or a text-event that emphasizes its own programming, mechanism, and materiality” [Raley 2002]. Codeworks emphasize their coded text-object/event differently than Flash poetry. The interface is made to either visually or sonically signify the output of the algorithmic processes, as it does in much of Cayley’s work. Letters change in sequences, replacing each other on the visual plane. The timed sequence’s visual appearance suggests animation, but in fact it is manifesting an algorithmic process of replacement that is meant to call into question the nature of language and its meaning. The procedural process in Cayley’s work accomplishes something different than a visual representation as in Stefans’s poem. The *animation* is a visual manifestation of the algorithmic procedures that are put to work on the letters (and in this example images and sounds). However, in order to understand fully how a codework is composed (i.e. understand its poetics), the work’s context must be articulated, and when such context is not provided confusion and misunderstandings often occur. However, when the works’ poetics is presented, they align themselves with the procedural experimentation of the Oulipo, or, earlier, the Dadaist poets. Some poets provide paratextual material explaining the compositional techniques of the work, both at its textual and material levels. With some writers such material takes on the form of manifestos, of which in this context “Manifeste du futurisme” [Marinetti 1909] remains one of the most famous.

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Digital Literature as Political Avant-garde

The manifesto brings us to the political avant-garde. If the formal avant-garde is preoccupied with form, the political avant-garde emphasizes art as life praxis, using aesthetic dimensions of artistic avant-gardes in practical attempts to transform everyday life. Our question would be, is that dimension of the avant-garde present in digital literary practice?

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First, there is the frequently repeated notion in the field that formal innovation is itself political. Like Koskimaa (whom we quoted earlier), many connect this experimentalism to a formal exploration of the potential of the medium, and relate this practice to innovation in a radical sense that is connected to the historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. Again, there are several ways of understanding “the radical” in digital literary works. It is often assumed that the artist or writer engaging in digital literary practice should develop his or her own individual form. Thus he or she is expected to experiment beyond already existing forms or combinations, i.e. to defamiliarize already existing modes of literary writing or aesthetic expression. Following this line of thinking, it is often argued that, for instance, Jim Rosenberg’s elaborate and precise ongoing Diagram series-project [Rosenberg 1968] is radical because of its disjunctive form. Rosenberg himself argues that “the idea of using hypertext to carry the infrastructure of language itself is an extremely radical proposition” [Rosenberg 1996]. Others, such as Alan Bigelow in *What They Said*, seem to suggest that political statements have greater force through hypermediation. As if the intense mediation of this new form somehow enforces the rhetoric in a new way.

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As the word digital in the designation suggests, digital literature is strongly committed to a medium-specific understanding of itself. Much as it wants to be political, it may be hard to shake the influence of medium specificity, and the modernist understanding of the role of art. Hence the formal AS political is almost the only route open to it. The critical discourse of the digital literary community is still laboring under the modernist problem — still struggling to bring together the formal and political. That critical discourse is found both in the paratextual materials by the digital authors themselves (the manifestos and explanations of their texts) and in the analyses and reviews by digital literary theorists. It ultimately relies on the bare assertion that formal innovation can affect radical change in the audience or the culture at large. But this is asking a deal of an audience whose expectations are not formed by a deep acquaintance with the historical avant-garde. To return now to Rancière, we might ask whether his “third” way gets beyond the bare assertion and past the impasse of the formal avant-garde. Rancière’s critical art changes the viewer’s perception, reconfiguring what is visible or invisible, and this formal effect can have profound political implications. In a recent interview, Rancière

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has denied medium specificity as the key to achieving this reconfiguration [McNamara & Ross 2007]. He argues that the notion of medium specificity makes the medium “an end in itself” and therefore a means of reasserting the autonomy of art, which would therefore preclude political engagement. Many of the practitioners of digital literature are still committed to the idea that the digital medium is essentially different from other media and that the task of digital literature is to develop that difference. Consequently, for them, Rancière’s approach is not a solution to the modernist problem.

Experimental, Not Avant-garde

The formal-political dialectic of modernist aesthetics continues to exercise a strong, if sometimes unacknowledged, influence on both the making and critiquing of digital literature. Rancière himself does not manage fully to break free of this dialectic, because for him formal experimentation is still a political act. Nevertheless, there are indications of change. Some digital writers are no longer operating under modernist (or postmodern) assumptions and are no longer troubled by the modernist dilemma. Although their experimentation is formal, medium specificity is no longer an unquestioned starting point. Their work is intended neither to advance the medium nor to constitute a new kind of politics.

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One such artist is Jason Nelson. While he explicitly speaks of exploring the parameters of computational interfaces, Nelson’s works show a wide range of aesthetic and cultural influences that include computer games (*game, game, game and again game*), web design (*Sydney’s Siberia*) and mash-up videos (*Videograph Fictions or Graphoems*).^[5] Nelson’s *game, game, game and again game* uses a platform game-structure but it has been transformed using child-like scribbling, drawings and colorful graphics juxtaposed with texts about religion, capitalism, real estate, traveling and so on. The dizzying and erratic design, called “anti-design” by Nelson, nevertheless strikes the player/reader as playful, rather than menacing or laden with corporate critique. The work has been called “as alienating as modern art can get” by the press according to Nelson’s web page, which features a press section. Nelson is thus hardly eschewing mainstream media attention; instead, his works come across as joyful rather than committed to formal innovation as the teleology of digital literature. Nor does his work — despite some avant-garde echoes in texts and descriptions on his websites — seem to be adhering to a program working toward political or cultural change. *Sydney’s Siberia* is made up of a seemingly endless mosaic interface for click-and-read interaction, and while it is compelling to explore and read, the work is not a critique of mainstream web design or contemporary interface culture. Many of Nelson’s works are playful and engaging in their pleasantly disorienting design. Interestingly, his website www.secrettechnology.com won the 2009 Webby award in the “Weird” category, positioning his work both within and outside of mainstream media communication. His site won over sites featuring funny “fail videos” (failblog.org) and cute photos (cuteoverload.com)^[6]

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Other critical and creative work is moving beyond the boundaries of what is currently called digital literature. New forms of online writing in social media and new technologies for mobile and locative writing are emerging and offer digital literary practice an opportunity to redefine its own cultural position. Some are using Twitter to create “twitterature” (short messages making up literary stories, or reimagining previous literary works within the constraints of the platform’s 140 character-messages).^[7] Others have employed Facebook status updates as a kind of literary serial writing or for tongue-in-cheek adaptations of great novels.^[8] SMS or cellphone novels have become popular in Asia, especially in Japan, where the genre reportedly began as a phenomenon among young women.^[9] There are YouTube videos of amateur literature readings, epistolary videos,^[10] or multimedia narratives in a wide range of aesthetic and literary types. None of these practices can be understood as continuing the formal or political avant-gardes of the 20th century.

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As these kinds of practices extend the definition of digital literature, they may also alleviate the burden of the modernist problem. The day may be coming when digital literature no longer views itself, or is viewed by interpreters and critics, as the avant-garde of print literature, nor as caught between the dual dynamics of formal and political innovation.

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Notes

[1] In 2008, the New York Times article series “The Future of Reading,” featuring articles such as “Literacy Debate: Online, R U Really Reading?” investigated how reading is transformed in a digital media age, and many others have followed suit [Rich 2008].

[2] At present, the technical and business models for e-books do not allow for the kinds of experimentation that some digital literature represent (sound, for instance, is generally not included).

[3] However, visual elements are currently expanding the sense of the literary, and printed books are influenced by digital multimedia. Thus, insertions of images and graphical features have begun to appear in more “mainstream” or bestselling novels such as Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) and Reif Larson’s *The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet* (2009).

[4] We would like to also entertain another possibility: that digital literature is not avant-garde at all, either because digital poetics does not lend itself to avant-garde practice, or simply because art today can no longer be avant-garde. During E-poetry festival in Paris in 2007, some critics and practitioners argued against using the term avant-garde in relation to digital art and literary practice. Simon Biggs, for instance, claimed that there no longer exists a mainstream against which an avant-garde can differentiate itself and that therefore one can only discuss the avant-garde as a historical paradigm [Biggs 2007].

[5] Jason Nelson’s work can be found at <http://heliozoa.com/>.

[6] See <http://www.webbyawards.com/webbys/>, Weird-category.

[7] See, for instance, [Aciman & Rensin 2009] or the site <http://www.twitrlit.com/> that tweets the first lines of books that often turn into a particular form of literary experimentation in themselves.

[8] For example of the latter, see <http://www.much-ado.net/austenbook/>.

[9] See *New York Times* article “Thumbs Race as Japan’s Best Sellers Go Cellular” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/world/asia/20japan.html>); New Yorker article “I ♥ NOVELS” (http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/12/22/081222fa_fact_goodyear)

[10] See examples such as Aaron B Cohen’s videos, “Angry Letter On Love And Cheating [Epistolary Tormented Version]”, <http://youtu.be/f5Azj4OYPHM>. A search among YouTube videos for *amateur poetry*, *poetry reading*, or other similar literary terms will generate results ranging from amateurs’ reading their own poetry or fiction, to multimedia works, to video-taped performances.

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