

The Little Database: A Poetics of Media Formats (2025)

Ben Kudler <kudlerb_at_newschool_dot_edu>, The New School, New York University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63744/dzudasqm2fmk>

Abstract

The Little Database is a book that merges media studies and literary studies to survey a series of “little databases”, databases too small to be useful for modern data analytics, but too large for a single person to consume. The work covers Textz.com, Eclipse, PennSound, MutantSounds, MUPS, and UbuWeb in novel and interesting ways previously unseen in either media or literary studies.

The winter of 1958 was a pivotal moment for avant-garde prose and poetry. Sections of William S. Burroughs' yet-to-be-published novel *Naked Lunch* were blocked from distribution in the *Chicago Review* by the University of Chicago administration. In response, much of the editorial staff resigned and launched a new, more inviting magazine — both in name and content — *Big Table*. Daniel Scott Snelson's *The Little Database* connects similar, though less sensational, paratextual events in web-based compilations and experimental publishing — forms far more avant-garde and inventive than anything the *Big Table* editors could have imagined — to the lineage of paper-based little magazines that challenged convention as much as definition. Snelson contends that tables storing small assemblages of data may lead to Big Table-sized literary impact.

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Snelson deploys the history of the little magazine in conversation with material text and media studies scholars ranging from Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman to Marjorie Perloff, Lev Manovich, and N. Katherine Hayles (and that's just to get at what a little magazine is). From that constellation, the little magazine emerges as a form unconcerned with wide circulation, wide purview, absolute compilation, or absolute anything. Rather, the periodicals, as former *Chicago Review* editor Eirik Steinhoff puts it, serve as “a collection of (potentially explosive) material put in storage for future use” [Steinhoff 2019] that seek to put together the best and most exciting works at hand during the editing of a given issue. Snelson refers to Scholes and Wulfman's assessment that little magazines were central to the development of modernism in the 20th century but never makes a similar case, that the form encloses the politics and poetics of the present, for the little database. Instead the entirety of the work is devoted to exploring the contingency of meaning-making in the latter cultural forms, as Snelson states, “[t]he transformations effected by digital formats cannot be generalized. Indeed, the only generalization we might make is that every file is transformed differently, and that we must therefore attend with care to those conditions of transformation” [Snelson 2025, 175]. The book invites the reader to imagine a new, nascent, literary movement emerging from the transformative screens of these small collections.

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A little database, like the little magazine, is unconcerned with absolutes and ignores completion. Snelson borrows Lev Manovich's description of a database as “any organized collection of data” [Snelson 2025, 9] and sets to work. “Little,” in the context of these databases, refers to something large enough that an individual could not consume all its material, yet small enough to resist large-scale data analysis. Such heuristics underscore that the little database, as a cultural artifact, is not something Snelson aims to capture within a model. Despite the title, the focus is less on *the* little database and more on tracing and exploring the slipperiness of specific little databases. Each chapter centers on one — or sometimes a few — databases, and concludes with a creative intervention into that database's tactics. The interventions are a form of media poetics performing art as scholarship, each taking a thread from the preceding chapter

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and then weaving that thread into a wholly new artwork outside of the database described. Chapter one generates a book of remixed theory/poetry. Chapter two creates new works of AI generated poems to create bootlegs of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Magazine*. Chapter three spawns an audio essay and chapter four a film. Even the index is subject to generative remix. These interventions are discussed in the book, but live in the open access digital edition hosted by Manifold, streaming beyond the pages for the reader to find.

The book is radically materialist in its literary criticism-based approach, focusing on cultural workers over philosophers. Where other works would, perhaps, cite thinkers more heavily indebted to continental philosophy to discuss digital objects, from the Frankfurt School to Yuk Hui's *On the Existence of Digital Objects* [Hui 2016], *The Little Database* leans more heavily on Hito Steyerl's influential writing on the subject. Of course, that is by design. While the book has a foothold in continental philosophy, it privileges the perspectives and practices of writers, artists, and literary critics. In this way, a series of chapters have more in common with Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* [Perloff 1981], a survey of experimental works within a poetic genre, as well as her *Differentials* [Perloff 2004], than that of Hui, Jonathan Sterne, or Alexander Galloway, though all three can be found serving as a background for the text. For example, Snelson's book opens with a reading of a digitized recording of William Carlos Williams' "The Defective Record" — and the interpretive complications that arise in the digitization of its type of media-specific works. In discussing Williams, Perloff writes, "but Williams also understood that, in the case of poetry, and, for that matter... pure abstraction was not the goal" [Perloff 1981, 113]. Similarly, Snelson focuses on cultural specificity — the concrete and contingent materials of writing and constructing poetry — and argues that pure abstraction, whether in software, the World Wide Web, or algorithmic systems more broadly, can never be extracted from specific material instantiations. Instead, the experiential meaning, that activates during a specific encounter, at a specific moment in time, is of central importance to the project.

The first chapter focuses on "textwarez" — text files distributed like pirated software — on a site known as *Textz*. The second chapter explores the aesthetic concerns and questions of preservation in presenting textual material as images on the website *Eclipse*. Building on the ideas introduced earlier, the third chapter examines the possibilities that arise when poetry moves from text to image to sound, ultimately flattened into sonic collage, as seen in the little databases *PennSound*, *Mutant Sounds*, and *MUPS*. The book concludes with the artistic blooms emerging from *UbuWeb*, focusing in particular on Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (specifically as it is nestled on *UbuWeb*), Vito Acconci's *Theme Song*, and Vicki Bennett's *We Edit Life*.

The 1958 *Big Table* episode is echoed in a 2002 incident involving a cease-and-desist letter from Suhrkamp Press, which demanded that the website *Textz.com* remove a file labeled "walser.pdf." Without opening the file, the press assumed it contained a leaked version of a forthcoming Martin Walser work rumored to include anti-Semitic caricatures. There was no journal to quit and no magazine to start, so the little database known as *Textz* created a file called "walser.php.txt." The file did not contain, but could generate, the contents of the text Suhrkamp was trying to suppress. In this clever gesture of resistance, Snelson argues, the episode mirrors the kind of playful extra-literary games that have historically shaped both little magazines of the past and little databases of the present. *Textz*, responding to such restrictions, creates its own contingent and subjective reading/writing and creator/consumer experience. The actual files hosted by *Textz*, numerous and interesting as they are, are secondary to "understanding how textwarez might transform literary sources in the computation of each user" [Snelson 2025, 40]. For Snelson, the concern is less with the contents of *Naked Lunch*, than the meaning-making potentials that a magazine that publishes works like *Naked Lunch* generates for the reader and the literary world overall.

While *Naked Lunch* was suppressed for its "filthy" content, the website *Eclipse* was taken off the internet briefly due to an unexpected restructuring of university servers. The error — whether moral, as in the case of *Naked Lunch*, or the administrative carelessness of academic institutions, as in the case of *Eclipse* — is a place where new insights about the platforms can begin to take form. Snelson deftly argues that because *Eclipse* went offline, causing certain parts of the site to malfunction and pieces of content occasionally to not be found where they should be, the website's otherwise invisible functions came into view. In addition, unlike Google Books, the site prioritizes human — not software — readers, hosting many of its works as image files. Snelson bridges the materials of the site with the specificities of the images files it hosts in order to ask the reader to use these technical details to "imagine these objects beyond their

analog iterations, as new editions with revised material codes that are as significant, complex and layered as the substrates from which they derive” [Snelson 2025, 87].

The contrasting nature of *PennSound* and *UbuWeb* leads to the contrasting construction of the studies of each in the following chapters. *PennSound* is explored through the poet and musician bill bissett. bissett’s idiosyncratic poetry is made stranger by its idiosyncratic printing, which is then made stranger by the performances bissett gave of his own work. The looping of phrases and words, both in the printing and in the reading of bissett’s work, can be seen as a funhouse mirror of transmission and digitization narratives, *The Little Database* argues. Poetry digitization is “[a]lready a kind of offshoot or supplement to the printed work, the social text of the historical reading radiates out to a wide range of materials connecting the past to our present moment, on- and offline, transforming our understanding of each in turn” [Snelson 2025, 123]. That idea leads into the most inventive and inviting episode of the book: Snelson’s reading of digital works deriving from Nam June Paik’s *Zen for Film*’s hosting on *UbuWeb*. Snelson discusses the work of Cory Arcangel, Mark Amerika, Mungo Thomson, and Michael Kontopoulos before going into a celebration and investigation of the compilation movie *We Edit Life*. The reading of these video works is a survey, of sorts, of the complex and strange dance generated from the interaction of digital culture with audiovisual recording. Snelson ends his book by showcasing a range of great new works — part of a movement yet to be named but owing a great debt of gratitude to the sites Snelson both builds and explores in this book. If the little database, as laid out by Snelson, is attended to, an entirely new form comprising text, prose, poetry, audio, websites, video, digital video, film, software, and a vast swath of other communication media can emerge — slithering, resisting the same fate as our erstwhile “digital commons,” which Snelson notes is completely gone.

The book leaves many questions, not only unanswered, but prompted for the reader. The scope of the work is massively humble and detailed in respect to the many new avenues of inquiries it simultaneously invents and virtuosically enacts. It leaves some other questions to future researchers and interveners, i.e., artists: What would it mean to read another little database the book doesn’t cover? What other little databases exist? What would a relational little database (based on something like SQL) look like? What are the particular concerns of web-based little databases in contrast to personal hard drives? Could there be offline little databases? Can a single work of art, such as *We Edit Life*, be considered a little database? The book, while short in length, is certain to be long in influence, as it lays groundwork for future scholars, artists, readers, website makers, and archivists. The twists and turns, both in methodology and in specific analysis, are far more exciting than any summary, or even multiple readings, of them, could serve. Of course, *The Little Database* does not make explicit what it makes obvious: The book itself is a little database, one big table of information. Filled with many links and nodes, threads and connections, shifting and contingent data — from experimental poetry books that their author created to tangled networks of filmic production and analysis, meant for the reader to create new work with/from — the book generates the same quantity of material to explore as it historicizes.

Works Cited

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