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# Virtual Playgrounds: Electronic Literature's Challenge to Authorship

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*This paper explores authorship and readership in two works of electronic literature: The Virtual Disappearance of Miriam (2000) and Tramway (2009). It argues for a broadened understanding of reading as potentially authoring and offers an expansion of what it means to read an electronic literary text in the twenty-first century.*

When conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith announced in 2014 that he would be teaching an English class entitled “Wasting Time on the Internet,” the Internet responded with curiosity and outrage. The class gathers fifteen undergraduates — who only communicate with each other via computer — in a physical classroom to consider the validity in which “clicking, SMSing, status-updating, and random surfing” can serve as “raw material for creating compelling and emotional works of literature” (Goldsmith, “Wasting Time”).

While Goldsmith’s course has elicited contention for its academic value, or lack thereof, it more pointedly reflects his claims about language and reading practices — which is that aimlessly browsing the Internet can be an act of reading. In an article from the *New Yorker*, Goldsmith claimed that the Internet changes the way that both readers and authors engage with literature—that surfing the web inverts notions of reading and writing as recognised within traditional print media, defined here as literature that is authored, read, and circulated via print. Goldsmith’s claim rests on the understanding that the extension of reading in virtual spaces, notably cyberspace as Goldsmith points out,<sup>1</sup> reformulates creative approaches to reading and writing such that “skimming, parsing, grazing, bookmarking, forwarding, retweeting, reblogging, and spamming,” would constitute literary (or even “readerly”) engagements with language (Goldsmith, “Wasting Time,” *New Yorker*).

But this kind of engagement with language, such as reading by clicking on a word, is nothing new to the field of hypertext and hypertextual narratives where the comparison of clicking on hyperlinks to the flipping of the tangible page was already widely accepted prior to the coinage of the term “hypertext” in the 1960s. In the wake of contemporary literary forms (e.g., conceptual writing<sup>2</sup>) that have been influenced by hypertext, literature now bears the possibility of being written and read virtually (on a screen). Occasionally, writing that *must* be written and read virtually is considered literature. The Electronic Literature Organization subsumes the latter within the category of electronic literature (“What Is E-Lit?”). Electronic literature forces the reader to engage with the literature through the screen and only through the screen, which places importance not only on the work itself but also on the medium in which the work is written, published, read, and archived. Hypertext most successfully delivers this form of virtual reading, or a form of reading that requires the reader to click on or, at the very least, hover over links in order to engage with the next lines of text. Engaging with text by clicking on hyperlinks adds more layers of communication between the reader and the text, transforming the act of reading into a more self-directed activity for the reader, who is allowed to not only read but to also construct the narrative to be read.

This paper considers how reading practices and authorial figures have been reformulated in light of recent works of electronic literature. I proceed by examining two different electronic texts, Martyn Bedford’s

*The Virtual Disappearance of Miriam* (2000) and Alexandra Saemmer's *Tramway* (2009), to elucidate further formalistic distinctions within the genre of electronic literature and to demonstrate how both texts challenge conventional reading practices by demanding greater responsibility from readers in ways that allow them to do as much as write the narratives they read. While such reader privileges conflate the distinctions between author and reader, it is also a conflation that is not exclusive to electronic literature.

In some cases, hyperlinks in electronic literature liberate readers from seemingly personalised narratives, though the extent to which these narratives may be acknowledged as truly *personalised* is challenged when it becomes difficult to pinpoint a singular author in some electronic texts. Alexandra Saemmer's *Tramway*, for example, gives readers the privilege to move text around the screen and to rearrange the order of words and their appearance on the virtual page, which changes not only the text's ontological structure but also the very narrative being read. But at root, what differentiates electronic literature from print literature (or, at least, print literature that demands the same level of readerly engagement) is that reading electronic literature requires a screen and demands readerly interaction via elements such as moving images and sound that otherwise cannot be equally expressed on the printed page.

In attempting to develop reformulated theories of authorship and readership in the context of electronic literature, I posit that database-like texts,<sup>3</sup> such as electronic literature, transform the process of reading into playing to the extent that some readers might even consider themselves authors. Hypertext fiction's use of hyperlinks likens it to other media, such as video games, where players are given options to choose from in order to progress the game's narrative. Therefore, the idea that hypertext fiction provides the same opportunity for choice allows for a comparison between electronic literature and video games and, consequently, an analogous relationship between reading and playing as being two actions that lead to the authoring of experience. Previous theorists such as Espen Aarseth have written about the difficulty of understanding the role of readers and authors in electronic literature. Recalling the difficulty in explaining the novelty of electronic literature to a group of literary theorists, Aarseth explains that the reason why some traditional literary theorists do not accept electronic literature as a literature is that analogue readers (e.g. traditional literary theorists) and digital readers (e.g. readers of electronic literature) read differently:

The problem was that, while they [literary theorists] focused on what was being read, I focused on what was being read *from*. This distinction is inconspicuous in a linear expression text, since when you read from *War and Peace*, you believe you are reading *War and Peace*. [...] In a cybertext, however, the distinction is crucial — and rather different; when you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact result of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed (Aarseth 3).

What is crucial here is the notion that what is *not* read in a cybertext is as important as what *is* read, as the approach to reading is the main locus of contention in Aarseth's conceptualisation. Aarseth contends that the reader of cybertext is not confined to linear styles of reading because the relationship between text and reader ultimately changes when "the narrative is not perceived as a presentation of a world but rather as that world itself"<sup>4</sup> (Aarseth 3-4). Therefore, readers of cybertext are not engaging with a representation of a world that a narrative would describe, but instead, the reader becomes *part of* the world itself. The reader is therefore

brought closer to the text in the sense that a layer of representation constituting the narrative's description is eliminated.

Cyberspace transforms the space of literary authorship and readership by incorporating non-textual elements that contribute to the formation of narrative and that may be associated with theories of gameplay. Hypermedia narratives, for example, incorporate these non-textual elements by using image, sound, hyperlink, and text as media of storytelling in cyberspace. Martyn Bedford's electronic short story, *The Virtual Disappearance of Miriam*, published in 2000, is an example of hypermedia literature that uses all four of these elements—image, sound, hyperlink, and text—to present and advance its narrative. The novel not only contains hyperlinks that allow the reader to virtually turn the page, but the use of image, still and moving, and sound (e.g. background music and recorded audio clips that represent the characters' voices) reduces the distance between reader and text, allowing for a more intimate reading experience that makes readers feel as though they are characters within the text or as though their engagement with the narrative serves a diegetic purpose.

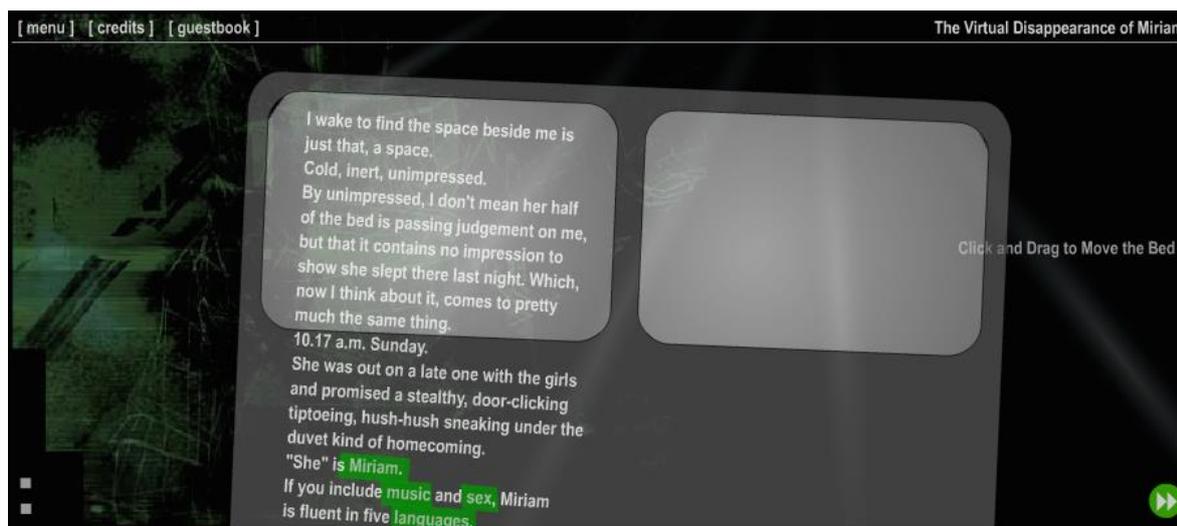
### *The Virtual Disappearance of Miriam*

Introduced as an “interactive short story in four parts,” *Miriam* gives readers the option to begin at any part in the narrative, which already is an evident break from linear reading (Bedford).<sup>5</sup> This characteristic is not exclusive to electronic literature, however, as readers of non-electronic texts can similarly flip to any chapter in a book and read in any desirable order. But inasmuch as the ability to begin anywhere in *Miriam* may reflect a break from linear reading, it does not fully liberate the reader to read in whichever order, as a given page always follows a preceding one. Therefore, it may be more fruitful to note the similarity between the presentation of this hypermedia text and the structure of a tangible book with pages. At the very least, it seems as though Bedford, by modelling a hypermedia narrative similarly to that of a printed book, wanted to give his readers the impression that they were reading a book.<sup>6</sup> For example, the hyperlinks of this text not only work to advance the story to the next page, but they also function as footnotes by allowing for slight digressions for the reader to learn more about the characters' personalities (e.g. likes and dislikes) and their physical descriptions. In this way, *Miriam* follows familiar reading conventions that one might more intuitively associate with reading a tangible book, e.g., reading one page at a time, having the option to advance to the following page, having the option to go back a page, and expecting chronological (or, at least, logical) progression of narrative that presents events in an intelligible order.

This parallel between *Miriam*'s structure and familiar reading conventions is useful to understand in relation to more avant-garde types of avant-garde types of literature, such as Alexandra Saemmer's *Tramway*, a text where readers are not given a page to read at once but multiple pages to choose from. The reader must make a selection amongst the multiple pages and click on that page in order to read it before the rest disappear; as such, *Tramway* does not have a narrative that allows its readers to understand the events taking place in any pre-determined order. This comparison between *Miriam* and Saemmer's *Tramway* exemplifies not only the wide variety of hypermedia narratives that are available, but it also demonstrates how hypermedia, no matter how closely it aims to resemble printed books, does not always create the same reading experience despite being read in similar fashion to a printed text.

As a form of hypermedia that can be read as a book, *Miriam* is neither a book nor an e-book in the sense that the reader engages with the text more interactively by doing more than turning pages or reading in the standard top to down, left to right convention. It is also not a film with text because the narrative does not progress on its own without reader intervention; although electronic literature utilises the moving image as a diegetic element, that is, as an element of the narrative itself, the presence of the reader and the reader's selection is still essential to the development of the overall narrative. Finally, *Miriam* cannot be considered a game — even though the text itself borrows the aspect of selections and reader instructions from gameplay — because multiple outcomes cannot be created from multiple readings and re-readings of the text. In other words, even though *Miriam* presents readers with the option of choice, there is still an established beginning and end to the story itself. A combination of characteristics from all three media thus challenges the text's potential association with print authorship because of the expectation that readers should not play such a formative role in the development of the literary work. Such concepts of authorship are challenged by *Miriam*'s intermedial elements. The text's use of sound in the form of recorded audio clips, for example, (that are meant to represent voicemails that the characters leave to each other or moments where characters interact with each other in the “present” moment) allows conjecture that the author might become the character and assume the role of that character by exercising the character's agency within the text. While character embodiment is plausible when reading print texts, *Miriam* allows readers to believe that they can take control of a character's outcome by clicking on the select hyperlinks, which is a step beyond entering, for example, a character's stream of consciousness — a common immersive technique offered in printed narratives. The reader, experiencing the narrative through the perspective of the narrator, also approaches the narrative as if to take over the role of the narrator.<sup>7</sup> If we recall that *Miriam* is told from the perspective of one character (the narrator), it appears to follow that reading this hypertext extends beyond imagining the characters interacting with each other or—in the case of reading first-person narratives, for example—understanding the narrative from the interior thoughts of only one character. Instead, *Miriam* allows the reader to think for one of the characters (specifically, the narrator) and to “read” as that character in the way that one assumes a persona in a game.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the reader's reading affects the communication between author and reader on the level of shaping *Miriam*'s narrative universe.

With regards to the linear qualities of *Miriam*, the presentation of the narrative also enforces a sense of linearity through the use of directions in the literature that guide the reader through the text. Directions informing the reader appear when advancing to a new page (**fig. 1**), such as the following page that occurs at the very beginning of this narrative:



**Figure 1.** Screenshot from the first page of *The Virtual Disappearance of Miriam*

The arrangement of text, supplemented by the use of hyperlinks, allows readers to visualise the events occurring in the story such that readers may feel as though they are essential to the advancement of the narrative. This added visualisation is nothing ground-breaking, as it is appeared in literature (such as concrete poetry, for example) and, more obviously, in cinema. Despite the similarity, this visualisation unconventionally introduces elements of play and viewing into the reading of electronic literature, as electronic literature, with its use of the moving image, demands optic engagement from the reader. In other words, electronic literature demands both reading and playing through the implementation of directions that suggest a form of playful reading. The directions that appear on the right hand side (“Click and Drag to Move the Bed”) guide the reading order and reflect an imposition of a somewhat linear reading experience. Even though electronic literature is known for allowing non-linear readings, the presence of instructions suggests the opposite — that the reader is told how, what, and where to read.

These moments of linearity appearing within *Miriam* answer not only how, where, and what to read but also what not to read. The speed and form of the text’s delivery — such as when some texts are presented more fleetingly than others — suggest that some texts are not meant to be read as closely. This difference in the delivery of the text’s speed reflects an attempt to mandate the accessibility of the text to readers who might all read at different speeds and who would possibly receive more information about the character than others who read more slowly. In the first chapter, entitled “Missing You Already,” information about the narrator is provided through a link that reads, “Here are some things you may or may not care to know about me (i.e. the narrator),” which transports the reader to a new window containing information about Luther, the narrator. The information here is presented as quick, fleeting text that enters and exits in the style of film credits rolling up a screen. In contrast to the static text that presents the description of other characters, this description of Luther intentionally prevents the reader from reading at a self-legislated pace. The pace is, instead, already pre-determined. This effect assumes Luther’s desire to remain secretive to the reader or even to detract from the narrative. As the text is written in first person — from Luther’s perspective — we may see how readers are forced to skim at a pace determined by Bedford.

### *Reading What Cannot Be Read*

Bedford's broken linearity recalls the abuse of linearity in Alexandra Saemmer's *Tramway*, a more recent piece of electronic literature that was published in 2009, which presents text in the form of text boxes resembling out-dated PC browser windows. Closing one window of text allows other multiple text windows to appear, which is to say that it is not possible to read all of the text windows presented on the screen, as closing one text box clears all the text boxes from the screen and produces a new set of text boxes. However, it is the use of the movement of text in Saemmer's *Tramway* that resembles the use of moving text in *Miriam*, as the moving text seems to represent the perspective of one of the characters. At times, there are even presentations of text in *Tramway* that are stylised for the purpose of creating a rift, or a degree of separation, between the reader and text, via a presentation of text that cannot be read.



**Figure 2.** Screenshot from Saemmer's *Tramway*

The falling letters (**fig. 2**), placed amongst overlapping text, prevent any reading from taking place. The slanted text hidden behind the small window of text (“verras qu’elle descendra...”) is presented as a running banner of text that does not seem to carry any association with the general “narrative” as a whole. In fact, it is not even clear whether there is a narrative present, or if the piece, as a whole, is to be taken as a collection of smaller events. *Tramway* is a piece of electronic literature that defies linearity, a readership, and even what might be called a playership, as this hypertext does not seem like a game to be played in the way that Bedford's *Miriam* invites the reader to “play” as one of the characters. As I will go on to argue, *Tramway* remains less accessible to the reader for the reason that the arrangement of its text prevents the reader from doing the act of reading, which leads into the possibility of characterising the text as a kind of conceptual piece.

By characterising Saemmer's text as a work of conceptual writing, we may consider how it is possibly a work of literature that is not meant to be read. Perhaps, it should be viewed and *thought of* instead of read. In this way, it would seem appropriate that *Tramway* would invite and gather a “thinkership,” as Goldsmith would call it,<sup>9</sup> as opposed to a readership. However, *Tramway*, still characterised as electronic literature, does not present a straightforward narrative, as each text box presents a seemingly randomised event that does not and

cannot readily be connected to any preceding or following event. Unlike *Miriam*, which contains four parts that altogether suggest a sequential and intelligible progression of narrative, *Tramway* does not provide the same linearity. Unlike *Miriam*, *Tramway*'s defiance against linearity does not allow readers to move forwards or backwards in the piece once they begin clicking on the text. The progression of narrative in *Tramway* thus depends on the reader who, by choosing the text to read, draws out an intelligible linear narrative, as the option of choosing amongst multiple text boxes do not provide any bit of narrative that is useful for understanding how the story is supposed to sequentially progress without any reader intervention.

Stylistically, *Tramway* is not characterised as a conceptual piece, but its structure certainly invites categorisation as a form of conceptual writing. Revealing her reasons for writing *Tramway*, Saemmer explains: "J'ai écrit les fragments de ce récit un an après la mort de mon père. Parmi les multiples éclats d'histoires ramassés le long du trajet que je faisais tous les jours en tramway, il y avait ce moment inavouable, indicible pendant des années, qui insiste. Un œil enflammé, qu'on ne peut ni fermer, ni garder ouvert." ("I wrote fragments of this story a year after the death of my father. Among the many bits of stories that I made everyday collected along the way on the tram, there was this unspeakable moment, indescribable for many years, that insists. An inflamed eye, which we can neither close nor keep open.") The fact that this piece of electronic literature was created after the death of Saemmer's father could perhaps explain the text's non-linearity, as the text itself is made up of memories that Saemmer had of her father. We may argue for a possibility that this non-linearity is intentionally formatted to resemble the fleeting and non-linear nature of memories and how they appear in one's consciousness. Such is to assume that thoughts float and do not present themselves in a pre-organised manner. To crystallise that claim, we may further posit that the presentation of text in Saemmer's hypermedia narrative resembles the obtrusive nature of memories, wherein the recalling of one memory may trigger other memories and, in some cases, overwrite existing ones via its placement in novel contexts and a subsequent creation of new associations. This lack of organisation might possibly justify *Tramway*'s non-linearity such that readers are not supposed to know whether to link the memories together in some way—which would then force a linear method of reading—or to independently view all the memories as being their own event. Perhaps this convolution could be the "constraint" under which *Tramway* was written. But to further explicate the way Saemmer presents these memories as sometimes illegible text, we may continue to seek comparisons between the ways in which stream of consciousness is presented in certain print texts as opposed to hypermedia texts. Doing so would highlight not only the novelty of hypernarratives but also how hypermedia contributes to other possible avant-garde forms of reading and writing.<sup>10</sup>

What is equally striking about the presentation of electronic literature is the use of a kind of temporality that is not present in print, which is to say that the reader's ability to visualise the actions taking place through an image, moving or still, contained in the text itself adds a dimension of timelessness to the text. Reading the text in this manner allows the reader to experience the narrative as though it were unfolding in the present moment. Returning to the short excerpt from Saemmer's *Tramway*, we might observe that the deterioration of the text, or the letters that fall down the screen as the reader is attempting to read the words, creates a sense of urgency for the reader who is interacting not only with the text itself but within the same universe or setting as the events portrayed within the text. The fact that the text moves, for instance, that it is simply not possible to bookmark a page when reading this particular text to then return to it at a later time, creates an urgency in the sense that a reading of the text as it appears now is only made possible in the present, as returning to the text at a

later time would force the reader to encounter with a different text and have a different reading experience.

However, it is also important to remember that this very interpretation of *Tramway* cannot be applied to all forms of electronic literature, as texts without moving text would be excluded from that definition. There are moments in *Miriam*, for example, where the text does not move across the screen, and it is very much possible to read a page, walk away, then return to where the reader left off. But because *Miriam* cannot be claimed as the sole representative of electronic literature, other electronic texts possess — and often do — an ephemeral temporality. Katherine Hayles describes this ephemerality as “the fluid nature of digital media.” She observes that while “books printed on good quality paper can endure for centuries, electronic literature routinely becomes unplayable (and hence unreadable) after a decade or even less” (Hayles 39). This is, Hayles notes, in part because of the medium in which electronic literature exists; the problem concerns the software and hardware of the computer’s operating system, which is to say that literature written on newer operating systems may not be playable and readable on older operating systems. The inability to archive these electronic texts — in addition to the inability of creating a stable readership in the sense that each reader would be reading the same words on the same page — poses a problem for the future of electronic scholarship, especially if the text itself is not guaranteed to last forever or to be accessibly read once it is published. There is also the impossibility of a canonisation of electronic text, as newer software can easily render older texts unreadable and force only the most recent of texts written on the most up-to-date operating systems to be in existence in the realm of electronic literature.

Bedford’s text blurs the roles of the reader and the author such that it is not completely clear who the author is. For one, readers seem to be playing, reading, and writing all at the same time that they are playing the role of a character. They are reading about the events that happen to the character, and they have the option to decide how the story ends by “writing” (or selecting) the ending of the story. By choosing this ending, the reader also seems to perform the voice of an author, as the reader’s decision in the selection of the ending contributes to the notion of playing as a form of writing.

This form of engagement between reader and text could be considered as a kind of engagement with a database, borrowing from Lev Manovich’s definition of database.<sup>11</sup> Manovich would likely characterise *Miriam* as not quite a complete, closed work of literature but rather as a “list of items” from which the reader forms the narrative by “[ordering] the list.” The role of the algorithm in reading narratives, as Manovich points out, is to serve as the “underlying logic,” or the settings, characters, and events of the novel that allow the reader to acknowledge the text as possessing a narrative form. The act of reconstructing this algorithm thus happens differently (though perhaps not too differently) in reading and playing (or in narratives and games), where readers of narratives reconstruct the algorithm by *identifying* the settings, characters, and events, and where game players reconstruct the algorithm by *selecting* (from a set) the settings, characters, and events. *Miriam* seems to allow readers to do both, allowing for not only a more explicit definition of the term “reader-player” to emerge but also defining how the act of reading in itself is a playful activity.

The contrast that Manovich later makes between narratives and games, therefore, seems to blur in a characterisation of electronic literature, as elements belonging to narrative and gameplay such as “ordering a list” and reconstructing the algorithm are both present in the act of reading an electronic text. As Manovich articulates, works of electronic literature, i.e., “hypernarratives,” are fundamentally databases. To reconstruct the

argument, the question becomes twofold. First, it is the question of whether forms of reconstructing the algorithm—such as identifying or selecting—count as forms of authorship if this reconstruction takes place within a definite set of possibilities. Second, we would need to ask whether the writer of the database (or the “database’s creator” as Manovich phrases the term) should be given the sole title of “author.” Manovich considers this latter question more carefully in his exposition of new media narratives:

Another erroneous assumption frequently made is that, by creating her [the reader’s] own path (i.e., choosing the records from a database in a particular order), the user constructs her own unique narrative. [...] Regardless of whether new media objects present themselves as linear narratives, interactive narratives, databases, or something else, underneath, on the level of material organization, they are all databases. (Manovich 227-228)

The emerging question that confounds readers concerning the role of the author is whether the construction of a “unique narrative” that is made possible by the selection of a certain trajectory through a database constitutes an act of authoring. Manovich labels this claim as an “erroneous assumption,” defending the idea that the selection of different elements and placement of these elements in some order, do not necessarily work to construct a narrative, linear or otherwise, and, effectively, do not constitute a form of authorship, as “on the level of material organization, they are all databases.” While this acknowledgment is certainly fair from a foundational standpoint, it also rejects the possibility that narratives can emerge from databases. This possibility is exactly the form of electronic literature. Electronic literature finds literary value through a selection of certain trajectories within a database allow the authorship of that specific trajectory—and thus, that specific possibility of narrative—to take place and to qualify as an act of authorship. In other words, the creator of the database may have created the database, but it would seem like an overextending simplification to assume that the creator of the database is also the creator of all the narratives that result from the creation of that database. Such a claim is similar to the idea that an author would be able to claim credit for the subsequent interpretations done to a text by its readers, which is evidently an incorrect approach to understanding the extent of assigning authorial functions. It could be that electronic readers, who are sometimes given the chance to construct their own reading experiences and materials, might claim electronic authorship.

### *Conclusion*

This paper has presented two examples of electronic literature that demonstrates changing approaches to reading and writing in the digital age. *Miriam*’s form resembles a more rigid database structure in that it guides readers through the text and allows readers to make selections on how to proceed, much like an interactive fiction. *Tramway*, alternatively, does not adhere to the same rigid database structure as *Miriam*, as the construction of its narrative is both left to chance and the reader’s discretion, making the text less interactive. However, *Tramway* is still structured like a database, as text that appears with each reading appears largely as a product of algorithm-generated chance. Given these texts’ shared database structure, it is also pertinent to note that this idea of the database is also applicable to non-electronic forms of literature. Raymond Queneau’s *Exercices de style* is an Oulipian text that recounts one narrative in ninety-nine different forms, and its database-like form serves to argue that not everything that can be read should be read, and like most

hypernarratives, it abandons the linear reading required of most traditional print narratives. As Queneau's *Exercices* demonstrates, databases are not the same as narratives because it is not possible to read from the first page to the last, as there is no order that dictates where the reader should begin reading and as all ninety-nine texts tell the same story. Saemmer's *Tramway*, interestingly, takes this same concept to an extreme by eliminating reader's choice, as readers are not allowed begin anywhere in the text. In other words, what readers read is generated by chance because they are not allowed access to the entire database beforehand.

Novel characteristics of reading that we may extract from engagements with *Miriam* and *Tramway* include reading as playing, like rearranging text in any order and choosing from a selection of texts, and reading as viewing and listening, much like reading as viewing a film. These readerly engagements, which demand more than simply reading the words printed on the page, contribute to the notion that reading may sometimes be an act of authoring and that hypermedial texts of the twenty-first century are beginning to expand the definition of reading itself.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I distinguish cyberspace from virtual space in the sense that cyberspace is a type of virtual space. Whilst all of cyberspace is virtual, not all virtual spaces are cyberspaces. For a recognised definition of virtual spaces, see Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001. Print.

<sup>2</sup> For a definition of conceptual writing, please see Goldsmith, Kenneth. "Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing." *Open Letter: A Canadian Journal of Writing and Theory*. vol. 12, no. 7, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Texts are considered to be database-like when the construction of narrative rests on pre-determined selections offered to the reader. Clicking on links as a form of reading is parallel to choosing options presented in a database. Please see Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001. Print.

<sup>4</sup> It is also important to mention the difference between Aarseth's cybertext and hypertext is that hypertext *requires* a virtual platform because the reader's access to hyperlinks is necessary in order for the text to be read. Cybertext, on the other hand, can be print or electronic text; its defining characteristic is that it acts *like* hypertext and may utilise hypertextual reading methods but does not have to be hypertext in form or contain hyperlinks in its content. The presence of the screen that is necessary for a characterisation of hypertext is similarly not needed in cybertext.

<sup>5</sup> Linear reading is to be understood as reading in the order that the text is presented on the physical or digital page (e.g. reading a book from the first page to the last page, reading from left to right and top to bottom). Whilst it is invariably possible for readers to construct reading experiences that subsequently assume linearity (as a result of a completed construction), what I wish to define as linear here is linear on the basis of chronological reading.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that not all print books require linear reading. Dictionaries are one such example.

<sup>7</sup> When the narrator speaks, readers could be tempted to think that the voice represents their presence in the text.

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that what I mean by “think for one of the characters” is to only say that the reader can select an action out of the predetermined choices written by the author that the reader would like the narrator to do. This ability for selection gives reader greater “freedom” in shaping their own reading experiences, but, in the case of *Miriam*, Bedford also already predetermines the number of possibilities for the narrator. There is more freedom on the part of the reader—but not total freedom in the utopian sense where the reader can completely determine the character’s agency. This same idea I am highlighting here also applies to games, where players who play as a certain character do not always have “complete freedom” to decide what their characters can do.

<sup>9</sup> Goldsmith previously noted that he was more interested in garnering a “thinkership” rather than a readership. See Goldsmith, Kenneth. “Conceptual Poetics: Kenneth Goldsmith.” *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/06/conceptual-poetics-kenneth-goldsmith/>

<sup>10</sup> The presentation of stream of consciousness in *Tramway* also brings to mind the kind of stream of consciousness popularised first by Leo Tolstoy and then later by Virginia Woolf, where the thought of process of the character is reflected in the narrative’s presented form and content. What differs between stream of consciousness as presented in Tolstoy, for example, and *Tramway* is that the text itself in Saemmer’s literature, is treated as an image, which is to say that letters can move and arrange themselves ways that force it to not be read as text. What is also depicted in this electronic text is the speed and manner with which the memories “fall” and appear into the character’s (and thus, the reader’s) consciousness, which seems to serve as a more affective manner of portraying stream of consciousness in electronic literature.

<sup>11</sup> Manovich argues that the ability to choose from an existing number of pre-determined by the author does not, in fact, contribute to the idea that the reader performs the authorial function but that the reader is simply selecting from a prewritten database that reflects an act of “playing a game” at best. He writes: “As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies. [...] In contrast to most games, most narratives do not require algorithm-like behavior from their readers. However, narratives and games are similar in that the user must uncover their underlying logic while proceeding through them—their algorithm. Just like the game player, the reader of a novel gradually reconstructs the algorithm (here I use the term metaphorically) that the writer used to create the settings, the characters, and the events.” See Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*, 225.

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### **Author Biography**

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