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Mobile Electronic Literature

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The thing to remember about mobile electronic literature (or e-lit as it is also known) is that it is not Flash. Let me clarify—mobile e-lit is electronic literature that is experienced through mobile devices such as iPhones, iPads, Google nexus, Samsung phones, etc. Before mobile devices electronic literature authors and readers were having quite a merry time of it using Adobe Flash¹ on standalone machines² and then came the “big falling out.” For a myriad of reasons both technical and commercial, Flash was not compatible with iOS³ (Keizer 2013). Given this meant that electronic authors could not use Flash to make content for the most talked about and used platform around, a steep learning curve was in order for existing e-lit authors and an exciting opportunity for new authors. HTML5, JavaScript, XCode, and Objective C became the new tools of trade; however, they often frustrated those used to the visual affordances of vector graphics software Flash. Donna Leishman (2015: 149) reminds us that the Flash community had more to do with creative concerns and experimentation than with a shared platform. Therefore, mobile devices’ lack of compatibility with Flash had huge ramifications for electronic literature authors and artists as it effectively shut down a stream of years of vibrant artistic expression and communication. Nonetheless, over time electronic literature authors found ways to utilize mobile media for producing new forms of expression. The

¹Adobe Flash: multimedia authoring and viewing software. Previously known as Macromedia Flash prior to Adobe’s purchase of Macromedia.

²Standalone machines: desktop computers.

³iOS is Apple’s operating system on mobile devices such as the iPad or iPhone.

lack of access to older electronic literature works is still a loss due to the limited provision of backward compatibility⁴ on desktop computers; we are unlikely to be able to view older works designed for desktops on today's desktops. This is why projects such as Dene Grigar and Stuart Moulthrop's *Pathfinders* (that documents electronic literature pieces) and Dene Grigar's *Electronic Literature Lab* (that curates and preserves electronic literature) are so valuable. These projects allow us to replicate and even experience older works of electronic literature as the authors envisaged and designed them. While acknowledging the past we must nonetheless look forward and recognize the many new exciting and interesting examples of mobile electronic literature currently accessible; this chapter will discuss a small few toward giving a brief overview of the current state of play of mobile electronic literature.

Pry by Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro is an exciting example of a mobile e-lit app that exhibits considerable fluency in the mobile medium. *Pry* is made by Tender Claws, an art collective and studio founded by Cannizzaro and Gorman. This app tells the story of James, a demolition expert who has returned from the Gulf War (*Pry* 2015). Part 1 of *Pry* (Gorman and Cannizzaro 2014) was released in 2014 and is available for both iOS and android mobile platforms. What is particularly engaging about *Pry* is the way the haptic gestures of tap, swipe, and pinch are also imbued with meaning. The haptic gestures are not simply there as replacements of a mouse click; they are part of the storytelling experience. To see through the main character James' eyes you spread and hold open your fingers, using a "reverse pinch" gesture similar to one that could be used to actually open someone's eyes. We are also offered the option to enter James' subconscious by pinching and holding closed again in a gesture similar to one that might be used to close something. The further association of the title of the work *Pry*, meaning to peer in or pull apart, further reinforces the haptic gesture of the reverse pinch. This tactile illusion of the act of opening and closing someone's eyes automatically imbues the reader⁵ with a feeling of intimacy with the main character. Sight—internal, external, and lack thereof—is a theme of the piece with the reader even being required to move his/her finger across braille on the screen as the character reads aloud. The ability provided in *Pry* (Gorman and Cannizzaro 2014) to switch between the conscious and subconscious provides what seems to be the missing link between movies and books. In films, we often lose the insight into a main character's internal dialog that is so integral to books; however, in *Pry* (Gorman and Cannizzaro 2014), an application that relies quite heavily on video, the reader is

⁴Backward compatibility is the capability of newer forms of technology to run older versions.

⁵In this chapter I use the word reader to refer to what Barthes terms the active reader since electronic literature may require reading, viewing, listening, playing, or using.

afforded agency to choose between either mode. In between the video-based photorealistic mode of the conscious and the surreal text and images of the subconscious we find text, telling the story simply and plainly but in a nonlinear associative manner evocative of our internal recollections of people and events. The storytelling narrative is not straightforward and the full sequence of events is constructed accretively but this seems appropriate for such a distracted medium as a mobile app in which a reader quite potentially dips in and out of content as they simultaneously perform many different tasks on their device. Despite this capacity for a fragmented reading experience the piece nonetheless still maintains a sense of momentum for the reader, a desire to reveal the full story, to find out what really happened, which is key for any good story electronic or analogue.

It is significant that *Pry*'s (Gorman and Cannizzaro 2014) capacity to allow a reader to dip in and out of a mobile e-lit piece exactly corresponds to Funkhouser's advice for electronic literature authors. In *New Directions in Digital Poetry* (2012: 245) Christopher Funkhouser states that, given the attention span and temporal constraints of the average mobile device user, authors could benefit from making electronic literature pieces that can be read in small chunks. Furthermore, Funkhouser notes it is important to remember that many readers will be reading e-lit on smaller mobile screens. *Pry* (Gorman and Cannizzaro 2014) in fact does all of this as it has both iPhone and iPad versions and the fact that it saves your progress and its' disjointed story arc allows the reader to dip in and out of the app as suits.

David O'Reilly's *Mountain* is another app that offers a similarly ambient experience for the reader but with less of a plot-driven story. *Mountain* (O'Reilly 2014) is an app that once launched asks the reader some questions; the answers to these questions are then used to construct a unique mountain. Time passes, weather happens, and the mountain continues, and once the reader gets over their initial automatic instinct to click relentlessly in order to make something happen a Zen-like state for both reader and app descends as the app continues to run in the background as the reader goes about their business. *Mountain* isn't as obviously a piece of electronic literature as *Pry*, but neither can it be described as a game. It does, however, provide the same reader freedom for intermittent interaction and engagement that Funkhouser (2012: 245) advises for electronic literature authors and artists. Furthermore, both *Pry* (Gorman and Cannizzaro 2014) and *Mountain* succeed in prompting the reader to reflect on her world, *Pry* (Gorman and Cannizzaro 2014) by raising contemporary issues of real-life impact of war on the individual, and *Mountain* on the modern instinct and desire for continuous actions and control. The evocation of reflections such as this is in fact exactly what we have come to expect from literature, so rather than trying to categorize electronic literature by specific content, modalities, or forms perhaps instead it might be more useful to identify electronic literature instead by its capacity to transform or evoke critical reflections

or connections. Funkhouser (2012: 246) suggests that desktop content designed to provoke viewer transformations may not effectively transfer over to a mobile device, that does not mean, however, that content designed and developed specifically for mobile cannot transform. Funkhouser (2012: 246) cites Talan Memmott's Artaudian-inspired test for a digital poem as to whether it has the ability to transform or cause thinking (303). In these instances, however, Funkhouser and Memmott are referring to digital poetry. The examples we have looked at so far do not fall into this category and it is important to remember that the poetic experience is often much more intangible and fragile to achieve than in other narrative forms.

Abra! by Amaranth Borsuk, Kate Durbin, and Ian Hatcher (& You) describes itself as a poetry instrument/spellbook that responds to touch. It is a playful piece that allows you to modify the text on screen in a myriad of different ways through touch. You can select specific spells from the top of the screen such as mutate, graft, prune, erase, and cadabra. The reader can modify the poem by selecting one of these "spells" and then touching the text with her finger. At the bottom of the screen there is a rainbow dial that you can use to navigate the poems in the *Abra* cycle. A limited edition clothbound book is also available; however, I only experienced the app, which is colorful and playful, but I wouldn't classify it as a transformative literary experience and I was disappointed by the lack of audio. Nonetheless, the strengths of the piece lie in the colorful aesthetics and enormous scope for reader interaction in the variety of spells and settings the reader can access to modify the text and even include her own. The reader can then share her own creation easily on Facebook and Twitter or simply save a photo. This potential social media connectivity in *Abra* (Borsuk et al. 2015) is an aspect of the work that draws on the affordances of the mobile medium, which thrives on and even demands at times a social media connection. Unusually, however, the app doesn't include audio which given the playful nature of the work potentially could have added an extra dimension to the experience—without it the reader's focus is retained on the written words.

Jason Edwards Lewis and Bruno Nadeau's P.o.E.M.M. (Poetry for Excitable [Mobile] Media) project is an example of digital poetry on a mobile device that maintains a strong focus not only on written words but also very evocative (sometimes overpowering even) audio. P.o.E.M.M. is a series of eight mobile iOS apps that deals with themes of belonging, identity, youth, and multiculturalism among others. The touchscreen interactivity of the apps uses the pinch and swipe gestures we have come to associate with iOS technology. The pieces also allow for the creation of your own version as well as connecting with online social media such as Twitter. Interestingly, the reader can even register their own version of an app in a similar fashion to limited edition print artworks; that is, one of one hundred. The P.o.E.M.M. website describes the apps as "making sense of crazy talk & kid talk, the meanings of different shades of purple, the conundrums of being a Cherokee boy

adopted by Anglos and raised in northern California mountain country, and the importance of calling a sundae a sundae.” There are eight apps available, entitled *What They Speak When They Speak to Me*, *Buzz Aldrin Doesn’t Know Any Better*, *The Great Migration*, *Smooth Second Bastard*, *No Choice About the Terminology*, *The Summer the Rattlesnakes Came*, *The World Was White*, *The World That Surrounds You Wants Your Death* (P.o.E.M.M.).

For brevity’s sake, I will focus on one of these apps; namely, *The World Was White* (Lewis et al. 2015). The reason for this selection is due to the striking visual impact of the work when the reader is initially presented with a pure white screen on launching the app, which remains that way until the reader touches the screen at which point text appears. If the reader maintains a finger press on-screen and swipes she hears audio, so this very immediate reaction to her touch evokes a strong engagement with the piece by providing a sense of agency for the reader. The P.o.E.M.M. website describes *The World Was White* (Lewis et al. 2015) as a “homage to the many, many road trips—short and long—I took across northern California with friends while a teenager. Now, much later, I have come to realize that it is also about growing up one of the few brown kids in white, rural mountain country.” So perhaps here we find another reason for my specific engagement with this piece as this theme speaks to me as an Irish woman with Arabic heritage who grew up in Ireland’s countryside. So once again this is an aspect that we find also in nonelectronic literature, the connection or relatability of a piece that quite often depends on your own codex of memories and experiences.

It is interesting to note that it is the more “poetic” apps that seem to be more suited to the mobile medium as there is less of a sense of a beginning, middle, and end to them. Poetry’s nonreliance on linearity means that it is easier for a reader to dip in and out of each of these apps whereas when reading *Pry* (Gorman and Cannizzaro 2014) for example, a story, the reader is more likely to seek an end, a resolution as such, whereas in *Mountain* (O’Reilly 2014), *The World Was White* (Lewis et al. 2015), and *Abra* (Borsuk et al. 2015) a reader is more likely to be open to a nonlinear experiential literary engagement.

There are many, many more examples of mobile electronic literature available for download on the App Store and Google Play and online. This chapter has only skimmed the surface of just a few; however, it has I hope shown how many of the same aspects, problems, strengths, and weaknesses of analog literature can be also found to be at play in mobile e-lit, thereby proving its value as a medium for artistic communication, experimentation, and expression despite the challenging and sometimes limiting technical aspects of developing/writing for this medium. As the P.o.E.M.M. website suggests, mobile devices can offer a more intimate interaction experience for a reader and the higher-resolution screen can provide an aesthetically pleasing visual and textual experience. Perhaps it is the haptic nature of

interaction, the ability to literally make things happen through touch that provides the reader with a potentially more intimate experience than in other mediums. Larissa Hjorth refers to haptic screens in relation to the touch screens of mobile media—she suggests that the screen is no longer about visibility but about touch (2011: 440). This is ideal for the purposes of e-lit as the more intuitive nature of these technologies mean that the spell of the piece need not be broken by the need for the reader to lift his/her head and look for the mouse; a simple hand movement will be enough to proceed within the piece. As Hjorth (2011: 444) proposes when discussing mobile media “it is the touch of the device, the intimacy of the object, that makes it so meaningful”—the tactile process of the analog is recreated in the digital through the haptic screen.

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