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Introduction

The Digital Imaginary

This book explores the concept of the *digital imaginary*: how computers are transforming ways of imagining the world and making stories about it. Writers and artists discuss how making works with code, databases, interactivity, multimodal authoring tools, and social media platforms offer new ways to work and lead them in unexpected directions.

The coded operations that they use extend the imagination, offering creative approaches that are unique to computing. For example, hypertext links and map-based narrative visualizations allow stories to develop along multiple paths, while generative tools result in stories that are continually changing. Computing also allows authors and artists to bridge methods of analog and digital media, and this book reflects upon how the logics of one or another approach play out, and on how ideas migrate through different forms. While computers offer provocative analogies for human cognition, computers also function differently from the mind. Many of the works in this book explore these similarities and differences. It is there in those gaps between human cognition and its digital manifestations that the digital imaginary resides.

The structure of the book is unique and intended to build cross-disciplinary dialog. The project began through interviews with David Clark (*The End: Death in Seven Colors*), Sharon Daniel (*Inside the Distance*), Samantha Gorman (*Pry*), Kate Pullinger (*Inanimate Alice* and *Letter to an Unknown Soldier*), Donna Leishman (*Front*), and collaborators Håkan Jonson and Johannes Heldén (*Encyclopedia*). Their works help define some of the crisscrossing trajectories of electronic literary and cinematic arts. The six interviews with writers and artists provide the departure points for commentaries by six theorists, two metacommentaries by Nick Montfort and Illya Szilak, and a final response to the entire volume by Steve Tomasula. The respondents come from fields of electronic

literature, digital humanities, and cinematic arts, and many have international reputations as makers as well as scholars. They were invited to consider how the interviews provoke questions that cross creative and scholarly fields.

In Part One, Stuart Moulthrop and Judith Aston discuss the conversations with David Clark and Sharon Daniel and their highly cinematic, interactive works. Their discourse concerns themes of memory, loss, and cultural iconography, and special attention is given to ways in which artists use interactive tools to combine expressive and documentary methods. As Moulthrop observes, by removing narrative as a guiding structure, new opportunities arise for narratives to emerge that derive from user paths, choices, and converging details. He writes how such works can move us simultaneously in opposite emotional directions. In accessing the stories of the database, interface is more than just design, Aston explains. It is enmeshed in the processes by which we interpret cultural information and artifacts.

In Part Two, Geof Bowker and Lisa Swanstrom consider how computing may refigure the archive. Following Derrida, Bowker describes how the digital archive of the Cloud is changing consciousness, writing that “fleeting thoughts that before would have been graciously repressed can now come back to haunt us through their digital traces.” In the works by Samantha Gorman, Håkan Jonson, and Johannes Heldén, this haunting has temporal dimensions as well as spatial ones, rupturing the archives of memory and biological existence. The respondents describe the ways these works refigure the troubled landscapes of memory and history. Their creative taxonomies and information systems, including those of the written line and the cinematic image, disturb one another, complicating the quest for meaning.

Part Three considers possibilities of multimodality and addresses how identity is constructed through differing media platforms. Anastasia Salter and Mark C. Marino respond to the interviews with Kate Pullinger and Donna Leishman, whose works, designed for younger readers, integrate a range of interface designs, interaction tools, and media platforms. The projects offer choices to users that parallel those faced by the works’ protagonists and tell stories of identity, displacement, and trauma. The projects combine media and modes. As Salter writes, such multimodal works defy existing disciplinary or genre definitions. While the works may speak to issues central to literature, cinema, and the arts, their hybrid approaches also transcend disciplinary concerns.

To expand this discourse on theory and practice, Nick Montfort and Illya Szilak were then asked to author metacommentaries, connecting the works

and conversations. Montfort is both a poet and a scholar of digital literature. Szilak is both an art critic and a creative writer who makes collaborative multimedia works. Finally, electronic literature author and theorist Steve Tomasula received the full volume to author the afterword, which is itself as much a point of departure in the discourse as a conclusion. The book is an inherently interactive object, and these commentaries and metacommentaries invite users to read back and forth across the volume to connect threads, concepts, and other media through references, URLs, and QR codes.

It is in working with emergent technologies that the artists and writers in this book create their stories and reveal tensions between the inner machinations of the individual imagination and collective or cultural ones. Computing has led the artists in directions that, in each case, are clearly different from where other media, such as print or cinema, would have taken them. They use computer algorithms that connect archives, memory, and media to address a variety of questions from those of post-traumatic stress syndrome to mass extinction. In connecting fragments from the database, others confront cultural mythologies, alienation, identity and justice.

David Clark is fascinated by how coincidence and chance can be used to draw together stories and cultural mythologies to create constellations among materials and also what he describes as “weird logic.” His interactive, database driven films merge philosophical, historical, and psychological inquiry. In *The End: Death in Seven Colors*, Clark connects events and objects such as Freud’s cigar, Alan Turing’s birthplace, Princess Di’s final moments, and Jim Morrison’s death that would not obviously be thought of together. It is built with Korsokow software, which is designed to facilitate the production of interactive, database films. In this system, each clip may link in various directions to and from other clips. This brings ambiguity to the images. Clark works with archives of materials—images, texts, icons, sounds, videos—to provoke idiosyncratic and surreal links. The logic is analogical. Identifying unconscious but densely significant relations between cultural materials, the stories build from tangents, puns, humor, and unlikely connections. In the process, Clark offers a surreal map of cultural mythologies and the collective imagination to understand cultural ideas about the death and the afterlife of icons. The ironic juxtapositions challenge dominant narratives produced by television, cinema, and other forms of mass media by offering alternative readings.

Sharon Daniel makes interactive, cinematic works that explore questions of social justice and cultural inequalities. For example, *Public Secrets* uses an

interactive interface to follow the personal accounts of women who have been incarcerated in California, and *Blood Sugar* presents the accounts of twenty current or former injection drug users who participated in an HIV prevention and needle exchange program in Oakland, CA. Where those works primarily use an interactive graphic interface to conjoin oral accounts, her *Inside the Distance* incorporates video and dramatic performances using an interactive interface. It is made in Scalar, which is a very flexible semantic web authoring tool. Scalar allows for a high degree of customization in its interface. Daniel's project is primarily organized into three categories: accounts, spaces, and positions. Lines of text are layered upon images recorded with actors or actual interviews with mediators. The project looks at a restorative justice program in Belgium in which victims and offenders are offered the opportunity to take active roles in the conclusion of their cases through mediation. Her on-site research, encounters, and interviews with participants are represented through a series of dramatic moments that take place around the meeting table – which functions as both a trope and a stage. These are performed by actors in a black box space. The interactive format allows users to switch among the stories given by victims, offenders, mediators, and criminologists about both the crimes and the remedial processes. Separated by a criminal justice mediator and the length of a table, victim meets criminal and users hear from each participant. In Daniel's work, we are all equally mediator, victim, and offender. Users move among the roles as do the actors, continually changing positions around the table. The visualization is not re-enactment but rather a form of theatrical reinterpretation that, in ways very different from Clark, also explores the borders of nonfiction. The interactive format helps to reveal stories that more conventional and single channel nonfiction forms might not. The approach brings dramatic tension without the melodrama of enactment common to much single-channel filmmaking. It seeks solutions through an understanding of the predicaments these differing positions offer.

Pry is an App-based novella by Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro which forges an intermediary experience between literature and cinema. It combines aspects of fiction, cinema, and game-like interactivity. The work is programmed and designed as an Apple application, and images are presented in portrait ratio. Users literally pry apart the text, seeing between the lines, as they both follow and probe into the unfolding story. The story centers around a Gulf War veteran and demolition contractor named James, who cannot escape terrible memories and who is slowly going blind. As with Clark's *The End*, *Pry* takes users on a journey among fragments of memory, but where Clark's

fragments draw from mass media and cultural mythologies, *Pry's* are far more introspective. Being designed for personal viewing on pads and phones also contributes to the private space of the work, while the multimodality pushes borders in how such devices are used for both watching media and reading stories.

Encyclopedia by Håkan Jonson and Johannes Heldén uses a text generator to create encyclopedic entries for extinct, fictive animal species. The work draws from and plays upon *The Encyclopedia of Life*, which is a free, online collaborative encyclopedia that intends to document all the living species known to science. In Jonson and Heldén's work, algorithms are used to generate strange creatures, and users follow an evolutionary arc in which the creatures come and go until all life on the planet is extinct. Setting the rational language of science against a fantastic imaginary of strange species that might be or might have been, the project addresses both the specters of extinction and the inadequacy of language to express them. It blurs fact and fiction, breeding impossible species from a scientific database. In doing so, Jonson and Heldén challenge the authority and conclusions of categorizing systems with irony and comic despair. The generative technology that creates a catalog also anticipates the failings and demise of such catalogs, even as it revels in their forms. The work has both digital and analog aspects. The generative system builds upon the open API of the *The Encyclopedia of Life*, which itself draws from other databases, drawing attention to the instability and corruptibility of online knowledge. Returning to analog form, the output is presented using a physical, old style card catalog that people can browse, pulling out the cards of the potential and defunct creatures. In its material form, it questions the reductive relationship of a few keywords on an index card to the passing of species.

Kate Pullinger primarily discusses two recent works, *Intimate Alice* and *Letter to an Unknown Soldier*. *Inanimate Alice* is a multimodal, interactive, serialized novel for young readers that follows the experiences of Alice and her imaginary digital friend, Brad, in episodes, journals, and other digital media. *Inanimate Alice* is a Bradfield Company production. Episodes 1–4 were written and directed by Kate Pullinger and developed by digital artist Chris Joseph as a prequel to a screenplay by series producer Ian Harper. The work builds upon arts of the graphic novel, animated cinema, gameplay, and interactive fiction. Alice's father works in the oil industry, and as the family travels Alice faces issues of culture, identity, power, alienation, and the rebellious curiosity of youth. *Letter to an Unknown Soldier* is another kind of collaborative work. In

this project, Pullinger and Neil Bartlett were commissioned to make a project to mark the First World War centenary. They selected as their subject a statue of an unknown soldier entitled Letter From Home on Platform One of London Paddington station. The soldier is reading a letter. Through social media, the public was invited to imagine what might be written in the letter that the soldier is holding. The work has both digital and material elements and resulted in installations, performance events, and publications.

Donna Leishman's *Front* is a story embedded in the texts and platforms of contemporary social media, mimicking and incorporating Facebook (Front), Twitter, chat, SoundCloud, and other apps. The protagonist, Daphne, has created a persona for herself on social media that thinly conceals illness, trauma, and tragic events. While *Front* continues Leishman's concerns with female experience and agency, and incorporates elements of fairy tale and myth, *Front* also achieves something different—a critique of our immersion and investment in social media and the pathologies these may conceal. The protagonist is named following the figure of Daphne in Greek mythology. In a reframing of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, social media offer the contexts for the creation and transformation of personas and the stories they generate online. Intricately designed to mimic popular social media sites, it draws users into a created environment where the coded rules of engagement may look familiar but behave in unexpected ways.

Several of these works address the relationship between the structures of the database and those of memory. Some focus on individual memory. In *Pry*, *Inanimate Alice*, and *Front*, protagonists (and authors) use interruptions, movements, and social media exchange to reveal hidden materials and stories. Memories, particularly traumatic ones, are addressed indirectly or emerge only through active exploration. *Encyclopedia* and *The End* are works that search existing media to comment on collective memory and consciousness. The fact that the former draws upon scientific databases and the latter upon popular mass media to similar ends displays an exciting or disturbing commonality as to what constitutes fact and fantasy.

The cultural-political instabilities of this period, fake news, radicalization through social media, and the breakdown of many up to now enduring institutions may be tied to this blurring of prior distinctions of fact, fiction, and genres. The interviews and essays in this collection explore these questions, looking for concealed meanings and paradox. They celebrate creative expression and how it is extended through computing, both in the making of works and

in receiving them. For example, interactive works require user actions and choice-making which implicate the user in multiple ways. Choice-making draws users into a creative process of imagining different possibilities. Actions have consequences, which may also have ethical implications.

Multimodality also achieves meaning-making. Multimodal projects cross modes of expression. This frequently involves making works that bridge different media and their platforms, but it can also include movements within a medium, such as by juxtaposing narrative, expository, and poetic writing or switching between baroque, blues, and punk musical interpretations. Clark creates modal shifts through the remediation of analog material, and Leishman does so by telling a story through Facebook posts, chats, and uploaded music. These shifts undermine simple narrative resolution. This book with its interviews, commentaries, and metacommentaries also combines modes. It is intended bridge discursive forms and articulate spaces between them.

Many of the works discussed in the book evolved through collaboration and digital exchange. The making of digital works often draws upon varied specializations, and computing facilitates bringing together those with different skills and experiences. Creative work can occur iteratively and be exchanged internationally. Unlike many other forms, these works may be transformed through maker-user and user-computer exchanges. The collaborations are also social. Many evolved through the shared participation of the artists and writers in interdisciplinary festivals, conferences, social circles, and online journals where ideas are discussed and responded to. These discursive communities, both actual and virtual, are also important aspects of the digital imaginary. This book participates in this collaborative exchange, both in its authorship and, I hope, in its use.