Neverending Stories

Neverending Stories:

The Popular Emergence of Digital Fiction

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For Paul. Thank you for keeping me alive.

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Chapter 2. Innovation Origins

Historical cycles of art innovation and technological innovation follow similar pathways, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable and possible, moving from experimental practices to cultural and even industrial interest and usefulness as they enter the mainstream. Popular entertainment media straddle these fields, continually seeking new methods of storytelling in both content and technology as they seek to peddle narratives for monetary profit. Novelty is, however, significantly flattened by the time it makes its way to mainstream culture; the truly experimental is fascinating for only the few experienced enough in the relevant field to understand it and enjoy its subversion. For innovation to be appreciated by the many, it must necessarily be simplified, filtered, its rough edges sanded and presented in mostly familiar packaging, so that enough of today's increasingly fractured audience can understand and enjoy it sufficiently for a commercial entity to turn a profit. In other words, in today's neoliberal Western society, innovation is individual and niche, and the process that brings innovation into mainstream culture is overwhelmingly capitalist.

Digital fiction (DF), as a nascent storytelling form that subverts the very structures of narrative as well as integrating a plethora of new media technologies, is in almost every instance an individual innovation, a primordial pool of rapidly cycling attempts to create something that will be fresh enough to be novel, and stable enough to persist. Its inherent instability, its dynamism and variety, work for the former and against the latter. Nonetheless, it persists, albeit in a variety that resists the overall conformation to a singular, recognizable, labelable and marketable genre. Specific instances, or species, of DF have cycled from experimental to mainstream (and back out again), through the "periods of integration, equilibrium and disintegration" (Chapin 1925, 600) typical of cultural cycles, often emerging in parallel from different sources. These cycles form "chain links" of innovation, "a learning process in which knowledge is constantly developing and being modified in an iterative series of feedback loops" (Bakhshi, McVittie, and Simmie 2008, 47)—a process that is both material and social, needing not only physical and technological cohesion, but also recognition and acceptance from socio-cultural spheres that would make use of the innovation and seek to reproduce and mimic it (Coeckelbergh 2018, 509).

As such, innovation alone is insufficient to launch a new form into cultural awareness and even stability: the ebook and eInk existed for a decade before Amazon's business innovations pushed them into mainstream acceptance and use. If invention is the mainspring of material (and thus human) evolution (B. Stewart 1958, 73), then media inventions are the instruments of humanism, “dynamically engaged within and as part of the socially realized protocols that define sites of communication and sources of meaning” (Gitelman 2006, 170). For DF as an innovation to take hold in mainstream culture, it must be a site of communication for the *mainstream*, for significant proportions of our cultures, global and local, to parse it for meaning and take some pleasure and understanding from that. There is no doubt that DF is now a part of mainstream, popular culture (as the remaining chapters of this book will demonstrate); this chapter explores how the chain-link cycles of ingenuity, innovation, progression, and saturation have evolved DF, as well as how aspects of its literary history have caused its disintegration in some spheres.

Innovation Cycles

“Innovation” is often paired with “technological”, and thus we have a tendency to connect the notions of ingenuity and invention with tools, machines, and computers (Coeckelbergh 2018). But of course it also applies to concepts, organization, and, most relevant here, art and literature. Art and literature, in these days of economic downturns and austerity measures, tend to be sidelined as extraneous, even frivolous. Yet they account for significant contributions to the economy, culture, and health, and they infuse almost every aspect of day-to-day life. Humans have a constant and driving need for mental stimulation, whether that be in daily tasks like work, or in cultural enrichment like reading or gaming. Innovation in arts and literature is therefore occurring continuously, whether or not any given experimentation becomes part of mainstream awareness and practice. A confounding factor is that we are largely unaware of most innovations—the ones that fail to garner significant attention. Regardless of their fitness for purpose (e.g., a light bulb that actually casts light), many innovations fail for many other reasons, including timing, resistance, lack of attention, and lack of investment.

The innovations themselves arise from various motivations and sources. With regard to digital fiction, many who create are highly experienced literature readers and writers, often researcher-practitioners with university positions. This presents one side of DF innovation motivation and source: playful experimentation from a position of relative “wealth”. On the other side is necessity, which drives a great deal of innovation outside of art, from better weapons in war to agricultural seeds with higher yields. In DF, necessity-driven innovation is often related to job and career prospects. From the creative writing side, aspiring writers constantly strive to be “original”, to provide novelty[4] in their books that will attract agents, editors, buyers, and readers. The game and digital development side asks for similar “palatable” innovation. Yet both industries provide little opportunity for newcomers, particularly if those newcomers identify with or are addressing inequalities in society, such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+, religious minorities, or disabled people. Many of these marginalized voices turn to alternative streams of creativity that have not yet been heavily colonized by existing powers in creative industries, as was the case in the early days of electronic literature (Coverley 2017; Goicoechea and Sánchez 2017). In many ways, digital fiction remains an underexplored wilderness encouraging such innovation by necessity.

In both these categories, however, the innovation is largely driven by individual interest. An artist or inventor plays with new ways to express or accomplish something; a doctor or engineer is tasked with developing a more efficient tool or to solve a logistics problem. Even when a team or existing corporation produces innovation, it is the culmination of individual motivation to create, to succeed in a career or contribute to a project. To shine. In these cases, the processes of innovation and diffusion of that innovation are muddled and hard to differentiate: individual innovations within existing corporations are not usually highlighted to the public, and most of what the public sees is the finished result and the diffusion. Diffusion of innovations in mainstream culture is almost always capitalist: mass production, marketing, and distribution of a product for the means of profit, from electric cars to ecommerce to streaming television. Digital media afford non-capitalist diffusion of innovations, such as memes and DF that hits that sweet spot between novelty and accessibility (for example, sportswriter Jon Bois’ viral 2017 hyperfiction *17776*; see Figure 2.1; see also Chapter 9), because its ease of replicability and sharing takes the brunt of production, marketing, and distribution costs, assuming a work can garner sufficient attention to be shared.

[Figure 2.1]

Figure 2.1. Screenshots from *17776* (Bois 2017). This freely available, widely shared hyperfiction conveys the dialogue between sentient satellites observing millennia-long and nation-wide American football games in a highly accessible multimodal infinite scroll format.

Individual Ingenuity

Writers are often asked where their ideas come from. Just as often, they don’t really know, because idea-generation in art is a very internal process, with little record left behind to expose how the mind eventually arrived at the idea of a modern Black woman time-traveling to the antebellum southern US (Octavia Butler's *Kindred*) or an assassin robot who develops humanity (Martha Wells's *Murderbot*). Innovation for specific interventions comes with more documentation, as the inventor records what did and didn't work in the iterative process toward the end goal. Yet what exactly is "innovation"? Is it a new way of working? A machine? Inspiring people to look at or do things in a new way?

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[4] While remaining familiar enough to be marketable, of course.

Innovation can be all of these things. It can be a machine that automates separating cotton from plant debris, a surgical technique to repair faulty heart valves, a method of workplace organization that improves both employee morale and productivity, and a work of art that turns its audience's understanding of the world upside down. Across many fields and practices, innovation is defined in different ways. In academia, we confer PhDs that demonstrate new and original knowledge, through new discoveries, new methods, new applications, and new theories. Hasan Bakhshi, et al. define innovation as an output, the result of combining new ideas with existing research and development resources (2008, 45). This definition calls attention to two important factors: that innovation is a process, rather than some form of divine inspiration, and it draws from and builds on existing knowledge and resources. In other words, brilliant new inventions in any field take hard work, and an influx of some form of capital, whether in the form of knowledge, materials, and/or financial support.

This need for capital is the base for one school of thought as to where innovation arises. Pierre Bourdieu theorizes that innovation, or "avant-garde undertakings which precede the demands of the market", depend on "possession of substantial economic and social capital" (1983, 67). This line of thinking posits that many human innovations throughout our history have been developed out of "leisure, free activity, creation" (Mumford 1934, 379), that as we find ourselves with free time and plentiful resources, we have room to experiment and invent, from art to machinery to philosophy. On a surface level, this theory has a certain draw, and the historical record of "gentleman scholars" seems to confirm that enough wealth to afford leisure time and the ability to weather risk is a key factor in successful innovation: Eli Whitney, Charles Darwin, Johannes Gutenberg, Jorge Luis Borges, Lord Byron (and his daughter, Ada Lovelace), Alan Turing, Bach, Steves Jobs and Wozniak, Bill Gates—all were born into middle- to upper-class families, if not outright aristocracy. Even historical artists, inventors, and scholars who were born into relative poverty—Edison, Tesla, Keats, Ford—nonetheless benefited from wealth that the vast swath of humans (in the Euro-centric Western world) were absolutely denied: they were white men who attended school, could get jobs, could get financing and loans, could start businesses or sell to existing companies, and could travel. They were able to learn their fields, work in relevant industries, and pitch or sell their work to well-connected social contacts. Thus innovation seems to come from leisure not because, according to similar men's conjectures, wealth affords them the time to experiment and the cushion to take risks, but because others' *lack* of such wealth and privilege prevents them from doing the same.

For these sources, innovation arises from necessity rather than economic and/or social capital. Necessity encompasses ad hoc creativity—reuse, DIY, make-do, or "MacGyvering"—"quick makeshift improvised things to serve immediate precise needs" (Chorpash 2013, 2). It also includes desire paths (e.g., shortcuts worn into paths through green spaces indicating where people "desire" to walk) and hacking, whether that be creative uses of existing products, or subversive uses to effect a form of social hacking. Lisa Gitelman presents an interesting case study of innovation in the form of Edison's phonograph (2006). Edison invented the phonograph (an instance of innovation through relative wealth) primarily for business use as a dictation device. Even when the nickel phonograph (essentially a novelty item in shops and pharmacies that, for the price of US$0.05, recorded and played back the user's voice) proliferated, it was intended to record and play speech. The phonograph was invented to replace business letters, not symphonies. Yet consumers, and eventually producers, "hacked" the device for their own purposes, developing "new social practices for producing and consuming music, new corporate structures for capitalizing and disseminating performance" (ibid., 73). Innovation created the phonograph, but it also subverted the phonograph's purpose toward a desire path as people—artists, in their way—responded to the material, which cooperated to move the device and its uses in new directions (Coeckelbergh 2018, 506).

Mainstream Adoption

The question of how singular innovations progress to mainstays in wider culture requires further digging into the phenomena of innovations and how they evolve beyond novelty status and into mainstream awareness and use (becoming, eventually, established norms). Here I am going to distinguish between "cult" adoption and "mainstream" or popular adoption and awareness: cult adoption or awareness applies to innovations that profligate and persist in niche groups or subcultures. These include phenomena such as fanzines and fanfiction, meme culture, maker groups, the resurgence of "crafts" such as knitting and home beer brewing, to name only a few. The internet has certainly aided niche subcultures, as it allows people from disparate geographical, age, culture, language, and social circles to locate one another via websites, forums, and social media. Thus many of these subcultures grow, and as a public we are generally more aware of them than we were pre-internet. Much of digital fiction, in fact, has proliferated as one subculture or another, such as the interactive fiction and webcomics communities.

Mainstream adoption, however, is inherently capitalist. The ruling classes—those with financial and social capital—utilize technology not, as early technological utopic discourses would have it, for the good of all, but rather to increase private profit (Mumford 1934, 27). Certainly there are very few innovations in mainstream culture that are not driven by commercialization: converting an invention or idea into a *product* through production, manufacturing, packaging, marketing, and distribution (Rogers 1983, 183). Most innovations do not make it to the mainstream; it takes a great many elements aligning in the right place at the right time for any particular invention or new idea to succeed into mainstream culture. It is almost never a case of “if you build it, they will come”. The innovation must have potential for commercialization, but it must also come to the attention of someone (or someones) who recognize that potential and have the ability to act upon it. They must be capable of either making use of existing infrastructures for manufacture, marketing, and distribution, or have sufficient existing capital to create new ones. They must then be capable of marketing to and reaching a large enough proportion of the population to make their investment profitable.

Consider two significant juggernauts of commercial innovation in the digital age: Amazon and Netflix. Neither *created* a new product. Their innovations were in devising new ways (internet ordering) to reach a wider customer base using existing infrastructures (postal services) to distribute known products (books—initially rare and out-of-print books—and DVDs). Their businesses followed the standard economic “S-curve” (see Figure 2.2), as they grew slowly at first, then expanded rapidly until they gained wide or mainstream coverage, then at a slower rate as they achieved market saturation (Rogers 1983, 244). Even their later innovations—ebooks/readers and streaming services—were simply combining existing technologies with their now-significant customer base.

[Figure 2.2]

Figure 2.2. S-shaped adoption of innovation curve

It is easier, of course, to point out innovations that made it to mainstream awareness than those that failed. Everett M. Rogers, though writing in 1983, noted that "The U.S. Department of Commerce estimates that 90 percent of all new products fail within four years of their release” (1983, 211); we simply don’t hear about the great majority of that 90 percent. There are likely thousands of aspiring Ada Lovelaces and Steve Jobses laboring in basements and garages and university fab labs whose inventions never go beyond family and friends. The timing is wrong, or they can't convince investors of the product's worth, or the marketing goes awry, or the manufacturing and distribution lines fail. Even if a product does make it to market, the predicted desire simply may not be there, often because of a failure to understand the culture of the target market (Linden and Finn 2003). Amazon's KindleWorlds falls into this category, as it attempted to commercialize fanfiction through rather restrictive licensing and publication—anathema to established fanfic culture. We frequently see corporate failures such as these, and those from similarly giant corporations like Google and Apple, as well as smaller endeavors like favored authors or musicians whose newer works seem to fall short of previous, because they're already visible. Unlike innovations from unknowns, we see them when they fail. In many ways, this makes known entities—corporations, content producers, authors, music acts, actors, publishers—risk-averse. They are unwilling to test new avenues out of fear that they will damage their current standing. They often become gatekeepers against innovations from other sources, those that have less to lose: for example, Amazon significantly privileging indie publishers who use their services exclusively or FaceBook buying Instagram and WhatsApp to control a very large slice of the social media pie. Even in the relatively non-mainstream realm of digital fiction, Eastgate Systems maintained its proprietary hold (and elite price points) over its StorySpace software and the early cultural series of hypertexts it published.

Thus it is clearly insufficient to merely note what an innovation does that's new and improved. What is most useful to consumers or other sort of public is not always what makes it to mainstream commercialization. Timing, culture, expectations, connections—so many elements contribute to the relative success or failure of an innovation that it is almost safe to say that the innovation itself is actually less important than the culture that receives it. After all, like digital fiction, many innovations arise independently from more than one source. Elizabeth Eisenstein reminds us that "Gutenberg's invention by itself is insufficient to account for the fifteenth-century communications revolution" (1980, 39), echoing Mumford's supposition that "Not merely must one explain the existence of the new mechanical instruments: one must explain the culture that was ready to use them and profit by them so extensively" (1934, 4). Computer games and digital fiction, these new mechanical instruments, provide a strong model for how innovations can result in either untethered success or relatively unknown niche.

Digital Fiction as Innovation

Computer games (and video games) and digital fiction have a common ancestry (explored more in Chapter 5). Mabel Addis and William McKay's *The Sumerian Game* (1964), Don Rawitsch, et al.'s *Oregon Trail* (1971), and Will Crowther and Don Woods's *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1975–1977) are all held up as examples of early computer games, in addition to the standard examples of *Spacewar!* and *Pong* (Juul 1999, 7–8). A distinction is made between "action" games like *Pong* and narrative games like *The Sumerian Game*: the former lent itself easily to the boom of arcade games in the 1970s and '80s, before home computers became common, where a single coin could take you as far as your skill could go. Narrative games, however, were more suited to private play, where clues and maps could be noted down and developed, and progress could be saved. Little cultural distinction is made between these genres of computer games; they were and are *computer games*, drawn from analogue ancestors and cousins such as board games, choice-based narrative novels, and table-top role-playing games, some of which involved narrative and some of which didn't. With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can see the origins of digital fiction in the more narratively-oriented works. Both aspects of these works as *computer games* went brilliantly mainstream, from experimental and/or educational origins and hobby innovations, to arcades, personal computers, and home consoles. Today, gaming and game development is a US$126.5 billion industry (Clement 2021), outstripping all other media industries combined; digital fiction, however, is still largely a niche subculture, despite its shared origin. The difference lies in culture, from one that is populated with early adopters to one that is purposely founded in tradition and maintaining status quo.

The Innovation of Digital Fiction

Drawing lines between innovation pathways—those of leisure and those of necessity—is certainly not a clear binary. Many instances of experimentation and invention, particularly in the area of digital fiction, are amalgams of the two. Arguably the very first digital fiction arose from the collaboration of IBM and Mabel Addis, an accomplished New York teacher with an undergraduate degree in ancient history and psychology from Barnard and a Master's in education from Columbia University (Henley 2020; Willaert 2019). The relative wealth of the IBM corporation in the 1960s combined with Addis's wealth of knowledge regarding education and ancient history (boosted by a large grant from the US Office of Education) to create *The Sumerian Game* (Addis and McKay 1964), the first computer game to incorporate narrative as well as the first "edutainment" game (Alexander Smith 2020, 226; cf. Wing

1966). *The Sumerian Game* thus established digital fiction, the “serious game” genre, civilization and simulation games, and text-based adventures out of the interleaving environments of wealth and necessity: the skills, funds, and capacity to develop an experimental educational tool, along with the need to develop more and better lessons in economics and pre-Greek history.

Other early digital fiction and games (which at this stage, were one and the same) followed similar paths. *The Oregon Trail* (Rawitsch, Heinemann, and Dillenberger 1971), perhaps the best-known serious game, was developed by a trio of student teachers in Minneapolis, MN wanting to experiment with coding and gaming and needing to deliver a teaching unit on nineteenth century Western expansion (Wong 2017). Will Crowther developed his *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1975–1977) both from leisure, as Crowther was a programmer with sufficient knowledge, downtime, and access to equipment to construct the spelunking tale, but also from a personal need to connect more with his children as his family went through a divorce (Jerz 2007; see also Chapter 5). These early experiments in narrative computer games fall into what Lewis Mumford calls “playful innovations”, arising in a peaceful society with time and energy to experiment and invent largely for the sake of the personal pleasure (1934, 101); these early works represent the digital version of the eighteenth century clocks, toys, and automata Mumford refers to.

In the decades that followed, digital fiction would continue innovating primarily from this position of relative wealth and leisure, eventually diverging into two (overlapping and somewhat messy) streams: creative industries and academia. The former stream correctly predicted that the popularity of the early text adventure games paired with a maturing population, who learned from them in schools and were now investing in home machines of their own, would lead to a very promising market for these texts as entertainment: the Infocom era of text adventure games on floppy disks was born. The latter stream continued Crowther’s practice of creating hypertexts and multimedia works on external disks and drives (pre-internet) and distributing them according to the familiar royalty publishing model for books (though, of course, many just gave them out). An enterprising group of academics established Eastgate Systems (Jay David Bolter and Joyce 1987), which sold both the software platform for creating these hypertexts (StorySpace) and published the works themselves, an innovation that was both a necessity (as no publisher existed for these works) and a product of wealth (academics have the benefit of full-time salaries, knowledge, and networks to draw on when experimenting with new endeavors).

The development of subsequent dedicated digital fiction platforms mirrored that of Eastgate and StorySpace. Graham Nelson developed Inform (1993b), the dominant authoring platform for parser-based text adventure games (known as “interactive fiction” or IF), as a hobby and coding cred in the wake of the Infocom era’s decline while pursuing his PhD at Oxford (Maher and Nelson 2019; Nelson 2018). Chris Klimas created Twine (2009-), a popular tool for indie games and hypertexts, in spare time between his job as a web developer and his graduate courses at the University of Baltimore because he was dissatisfied with the existing DF tools (largely Inform and other parser-based platforms) (Parker 2018). Ink and ChoiceScript (and their various iterations) are freely available tools created by indie IF/games companies Inkle and Choice of Games; according to their respective web pages (Choice of Games n.d.; inkle n.d.), both these tools were developed in-company to create IF/games in the desire path of each, and later released to the end users. The result of these more commercial—yet still free—innovations is to benefit the companies themselves, as they build communities that both purchase and play their outputs, and create new outputs for publication.

DF creators were not and have never been restricted to platforms specifically purposed for digital narrative; in fact, some practitioners and scholars determinedly turn away from such platforms in the interest of crafting and studying “truly” original work. These practices, again, are a combination of wealth-innovation (artists and writers who have the privilege to create works with almost no expectation of monetary return on investment) and necessity-innovation (they are forging desire paths to the work they want to author through software programs not intended to be used in this manner). DF creators have used graphic design tools (Macromedia/Adobe Flash), ebooks (ePub), social media (forums, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and even YouTube), business tools (Microsoft Office, Google Forms, Google Script), mobile apps, artificial intelligence, various programming languages, and plain old HTML/CSS/JavaScript to populate the web with a vast array of textual forms. Many of these are experiments that are largely unrepeated (such as Porpentine’s *All Your Time-Tossed Selves* [2016], constructed with Google Forms), but many catch on and become DF genres of their own, such as Twitter bots, generated novels, Flash works, and interactive films. The question remains: why are some innovations repeatedly taken up enough to catch on (as computer games clearly have), and others languish as once-promising-novelties (like a great deal of DF)?

Mainstream Games and Niche DF

Despite their common origins, games and digital fiction operate in very different cultures. Introducing the new technology of the computer to games has proven vastly different from introducing it to books. Rogers describes a similar puzzling dynamic from the introduction of Roman Catholicism to the Native Americans of the Southwestern United States (colonialism issues notwithstanding): in New Mexico, tribes in the east adopted the new religion readily, while western tribes violently revolted. His conclusion was that the eastern tribes' patriarchal-based religion made them more favorable to the patriarchal Catholicism, while the western's matriarchal-based religion predisposed them to outright rejection. "Old ideas are the main tools with which new ideas are assessed. One cannot deal with an innovation except on the basis of the familiar and the old fashioned" (1983, 224). Acceptance of the computer, and all the changes it wrought, is greatly dependent on the existing cultural attitudes of the group contemplating its adoption.

Games arose from a tech-literate, early-adopter culture. It is no coincidence that the first games were developed by tech companies, university laboratories, and hobbyist programmers: these are people who are eager for change, open to new ways of working, capable of handling risk, with more favorable attitudes toward science and greater knowledge of and access to newly emerging technologies and concepts (Rogers 1983). Early game developers were influenced by the early twentieth century wave of technological utopianism:[5] "better living through science", the Moon landings, the futuristic tech-enhanced fiction of H.G. Wells and Isaac Asimov and *Star Trek* and *Amazing Stories*. This culture's discourse for decades had been looking forward to just such an innovation as the computer, something that would provide a wealth of resources, time, leisure, adventure, and, yes, war. They eagerly embraced it for what it could offer in terms of positive change, and there was very little discourse as to its negative potential (such as driving board games out of existence). Their early adoption, as we now see in the enormity of the games industry, was well-rewarded.

Just as games drew from war and sport, they also drew from narrative. Many early text adventure games were based on table-top role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, but they also included adaptations of popular novels and stories that might have been at home on a shelf next to Ursula Le Guin or Raymond Chandler: for example, Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Adams and Meretzky 1984), *A Mind Forever*

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[5] With the exceptions of pioneering women such as Mabel Addis, Kathryn Johnson, Ada Lovelace, Hedy LaMarr, and Alice Sheldon (James Tiptree Jr.), these were also largely white cis-het male-dominated fields, a trend that continues to infect the games industry and culture today.

Voyaging (Meretzky 1985), and *Trinity* (Moriarty 1986). Infocom's era in mainstream culture, the era of the text adventure game, largely ended when personal computers and games consoles progressed to more sophisticated graphical capabilities (see Chapter 5)—though its niche culture continued as "interactive fiction", thanks to efforts such as Graham Nelson's Inform software (1993b). Yet the industries most closely associated with narrative—book and magazine publishing, literary scholars and critics—took the opposite viewpoint on computer-aided storytelling to the tech industry. They (almost violently) rejected them, repeatedly, at least in Western culture.

The history of publishing and the study of English literature tells us a lot about why the computer as an innovation in narrative was rejected. Publishing, while founded on one of the most well-known and world-changing innovations in history, has nonetheless had 600 years to become embedded into culture. As a technology, printing has had very little competition in all that time—the publishing industry has incorporated upgrades, including laser printing and print-on-demand, but few to no "disruptive" innovations. Print culture is defined by notions of authority, copyright, and permanence, all very top-down and hierarchical. Combined with the modern publishing industry's declining share of a very competitive media market, this embedded culture makes for an attitude that is extremely resistant to change. Even minor innovations are treated as one-off novelties or fodder only for critics and scholars, such as the experimentation with narrative forms and conventions that present in texts like *Finnegan's Wake*, *Ulysses*, the Oulipo movement, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *House of Leaves*, *Hopscotch*, *Composition No. 1*, *The Unfortunates*, and even Ryan North's *To Be or Not To Be: That is the Adventure* choose-your-path *Hamlet* adaptation (J. Joyce 1939; 1922; Le Guin 1969; Danielewski 2000; Cortázar 1966; Saporta 1962; Johnson 1969; North 2015c). Ebooks, which are merely digital representations of hard copy books and thus do not alter anything other than the delivery mechanisms and materials of print narrative, likewise presented a widely-resisted innovation. Despite existing in some form or another in approximately the same timeline as the computer game (since the mid-twentieth century), the ebook had very limited mainstream acceptance until Amazon pushed it there almost by force, presenting its own dedicated ereader in 2007 and strong-arming publishers into ebook agreements (Laquintano 2016; R. L. Skains 2019b; Warren 2010). Ebooks bloomed as a result (in addition to Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing aiding indie publishers), and the subsequent proliferation of mobile personal devices and ereader apps helped to establish the form in the mainstream.

The scholarly culture surrounding English-language literature (with knock-on effects to post-colonial cultures) puts further brakes on any element of change or innovation within the field. The study of English literature as an academic subject is founded in efforts to maintain specific cultural values and norms, particularly those of the patriarchal, aristocratic, late nineteenth century Britain. With wars, literacy, the decline of religion, and the rise of industry bringing wholesale changes to British society, the study of English literature was seen as a handy replacement for the indoctrination of shared cultural values in all British citizens (Eagleton 2008). The literary canon was established not to laud innovation, but to quash it—to cultivate, particularly in the revolution-prone working classes, an emotionally-driven loyalty to the existing social hierarchy:

> [English literature] would communicate to [the masses] the moral riches of bourgeois civilization, impress upon them a reverence for middle-class achievements, and, since reading is an essentially solitary, contemplative activity, curb in them any disruptive tendency to collective political action (ibid., 22).

If this blatant purpose was unknown (or tacitly accepted) in literature departments, classrooms, and publishing houses throughout the English-speaking world by the time computers entered the scene, it was nonetheless by then entirely embedded in the pedagogy and practices of all associated with written narrative. Martin Luther had used the printed word to lead a revolution against Catholic dominance and dogma; Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, and their contemporaries used it to create a new religion and culture of stagnancy based on English patriarchy, colonialism, and classism.

Thus when computers entered the scene, the literary, writing, reading, publishing, and critiquing culture that had been taught with the English literature canon and embedded with those particular values outright rejected every element. Literature—prose, poetry, the novel, even the theatrical play—had become the measure of civilization, and any attempt to alter it was an attack, not only on a nation and its history, but on each individual personally. Literary culture has many techniques for othering and thus discounting (and even decrying) works that emerge despite its efforts, including burdening any innovation with a "genre" label: experimental, trade, mystery, science fiction, fantasy, special interest. Many of these encompass work that is primarily written by or for an audience other than white cis-het males: young adult, romance, women's lit, chick lit, and "identity" genres based on race, religion, or sexuality. While current discourse is using this practice to forge new paths (for example, authors and publishers creating LGBTQIA+ fiction, BlackLit, Afrofuturism, etc.), both industry and scholarly literary culture remain intensely conservative and defensive. If it is gauche to push back against the movement toward gender, sexuality, and race inclusivity in the field, there are few social norms to prevent it from rejecting *technology* in the same way; the industry may be unable to resist “identity” publishing, but it can and does actively resist all things digital.

Thus one of the best innovation-killing phrases emerged from literary culture: “the death of the book”. Much debate has circled around this topic, from pessimistic prognosticators to skeptical scholars. Google’s Ngram Viewer shows a relatively steady rise in the use of the phrase since the mid-1960s, coinciding not only with the first computer games and digital fiction, but also with home televisions and Marshall McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), which lamented the stagnation and authoritative effects of print on culture in general, and predicted a decline of print thanks to newer media. The phrase rises to a peak in 1998, at the confluence of Geoffrey Nunberg’s edited volume *The Future of the Book* (1996), which once again noted the death of the book at the hands of new media, and the rise of mainstream-available internet and ebooks. Interestingly, the phrase declined dramatically until 2011, perhaps as a result of computers and the internet *not*, in fact, having deleterious effects on book production, as well as the precipitous rise in ebook publication and sales thanks to cheap ereader devices and apps and direct-to-consumer epublishing around 2007. In all likelihood its current peak is related to the backwash of discourse: critics and scholars pointing out that, yet again, the death of the book has been greatly exaggerated (Fitzpatrick 2006).

The “death of the book” discourse had little effect on the actual book (production of which has increased, rather than decreased, in inverse proportion to the rise of such fears); it did, however, cut off digital fiction’s head whenever it rose above the parapet. Digital fiction, rather than riding the coattails of games’ rocket to success, continually tried to nose its way into literary realms. Enhanced books, vooks, hypertext books: they all seem to have looked at computer games and attempted to mimic that innovation without understanding the underlying culture. Regardless of how useful enhancements might be to books (and in cases like children’s books and medical texts, they caught on), literary culture was not going to open the gates for them the same way gaming and tech culture did. As the games industry moved on to multi-player and graphic-based games in the wake of networked connections and more capable machines (growing enormously in terms of commercial and mainstream market share and relevance), computer-aided literature dribbled away into cracks in the literary establishment: subcultures of interactive fiction, hypertexts, and web fiction, largely centered in the relative wealth of university settings.

That it would do so in the very foundations of literary scholarship is something of an irony. To date, there are no departments for digital fiction, electronic literature, or other such nomenclature. Most scholars who work in the field, either as critics or as practitioners—or both—are embedded in literature departments where they are often the only member of staff to embrace technologically-enhanced narratives. Others are seated in media departments, which can commiserate as victims of literary elitist bullying, while some luckier academics find homes in the many games studies departments that are emerging as the neoliberal university eyes the enormous industry and attempts to suckle on its teat. Regardless, this academic "avant-garde" often fails to stray far from its roots, playing the black sheep in the literary field while still striving for paternal acceptance. The largest academic organization in the field adopted the moniker "Electronic Literature Organization", its associated journal the *electronic book review*. The ELO and *ebr* embrace "born-digital" poetry, narrative, and even performance, but not games until relatively recently, and in the organization's first three volumes of "canon-establishing" collections of elit, no works available for commercial sale were permitted. These practices all align with the literary field's attitudes and values, gatekeeping the works in an avant-garde ivory tower from positions of privilege (salaried posts that provide wealth for experimentation and risk) (cf. Porpentine 2012).

Thus the cycle is cemented. A culture that actively resists innovation essentially created a moral panic over its supposed demise, the death of the book, and pushed the innovation into small niches and subcultures; those who persisted in pursuing the innovation either formed communities similar to internet fandoms, or were ostracized enough to build their own ivory tower in the same literary cultural model to justify their continued existence. Elements of the community distanced themselves from "non-literary" work such as games and commercial interactive fiction, just as other literary scholars distance themselves from "lesser" work such as genre fiction and popular media in order to maintain their position. In this sort of environment, constantly pushed to demonstrate the worthiness of their work, elit academia continually favored the experimental and avant-garde. Compounding this march toward elitism is the fact that these are scholars who earned advanced degrees in English literature, by and large: they are exceptionally experienced readers with deep awareness and understanding of literary tradition, in a field that has historically emphasized linguistic and structural defamiliarization over cultural contexts. It makes complete sense, then, that they would seek to study and create works that push boundaries of language and form, as opposed to what a media, communications, or social studies scholar might be interested in: the cultural effects of such works.

Nonetheless, the results are the same: once mainstream computer games moved on from text-oriented environments, most of the digital fiction that remained came from scholars and artists positioned in academia (even Inform was created by Nelson while studying for his PhD at Oxford). The works that emerged—those "canonical" elit texts—were created for fellow academics, those exceptionally experienced readers, not for the mainstream public. Thus when the mainstream public encountered them, they were already too far diverged from what the average reader or gamer was familiar with. The innovations were too extreme, too complex to gain a hold, and once a reader/player had developed negative experiences with digital fiction, they were not only less likely to seek it out again, they were more likely to spread their negative reaction to others, "damn[ing] the adoption of future innovations" (Rogers 1983, 224). Inversely, if these texts ever attempted to represent themselves as games, as in the case of Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest* (2013), they were rejected by the gaming community as "not games",[6] thus policing them into a wasteland of a gap between literature and games—at least for a while.

DF (Re)Emergence in the Mainstream

Recent cultural movements and the maturation of new generations born into digital cultures are changing the landscape for digital fiction. As a form it has evolved more than once: in early educational games, in text adventure games, in hypertexts, Flash fiction, interactive film, and more. It would be easy to posit that this wild proliferation of forms and media could be another factor in its failure to rise to mainstream awareness; I would counter that games come in every shape, form, and size, from puzzles to RPGs to mobile apps and first-person shooters, and no argument has ever been made that this harms the form. Rather, it is *in spite* of this frequent emergence and obvious adaptability that digital fiction has stumbled, as it struggled to recover from the cultural blows literary culture dealt it. The moral panic over the death of the book continues to subside, problematic othering of genres and forms due to sexism and racism is being called out, and, particularly in the wake of a global pandemic that found us all reliant on digital media for entertainment and connection, almost every cultural industry has awakened to the benefits of digital technology.

Strong cultural movements renewing fights for equality for women, people of color, LGBTQIA+, disabled people, religious and ethnic minorities, and indigenous groups have trickled into interactive media to counter the dominant white cis-het male patriarchy in both gaming and publishing industries.[7] With little creative power in triple-A games, these historically excluded groups have turned to indie game development in smaller, more personal and emotional games, text-based games, and interactive fiction. Similarly, in developing countries with unstable infrastructure and fewer available digital devices, innovations are being applied to mobile technology and cross-pollinated with older media forms including film and television. "[C]reative life", as Mumford notes, "is necessarily a social product… neither tradition nor product can remain the sole possession of the scientist or the artist or the philosopher, still less of the privileged groups that, under capitalist conventions, so largely support them" (1934, 409–10). Innovations are not created in vacuums; they are subject to the cultures that produce, perceive, and implement them (Coeckelbergh 2018).

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[6] In addition, of course, to the larger issue of sexism and misogyny in gamer culture that Gamergate illustrated.

Conclusion

Art and literature, like any industry, have cycles of innovation, establishment, and reinvention. The innovation inherent in various art and literature movements such as modernism and postmodernism is a dialogic response to that which has come before: modernism rejecting strict realism in an attempt to reveal deeper truths, and postmodernism rejecting all notions of convention and structure in order to call attention to the artificiality of all creative work. Innovation is the heart of art and literature, as creators seek to show us our world and our selves in new ways, to defamiliarize them for the purposes of enlightenment and emotional connection. The electronic turn for artistic endeavors is no different; it's simply that it has emerged in a medium opening the floodgates for innovation in a many-to-many model, battling against creative industries that have grown overlarge and view such subversion as a threat, and lost in a sea of innovation that atomizes audience attention. Innovation in digital fiction is occurring everywhere, at all times, just frequently hidden in niches and subcultures.

Yet it is specifically these niches and subcultures that make it rich with diversity, a huge component in the successful survival of any newly emerging genre or field, enabling the form to offer a little something for everyone, to adapt to new environments, uses, and cultural leanings. As the chapters in this book will demonstrate, digital fiction has expanded many times beyond the walls of academic privilege and the passive gatekeeping of the avant-garde, regardless of whether or not that particular community has recognized or accepted it. For decades we scholar-practitioners have pondered why elit hasn't "caught on"; it has, of course—it's just that *our* elit hasn't entirely caught on. It's time we descended and accepted the innovations rising from communities and cultures outside our own if we are interested in seeing DF rise and make an impact on the world: "such change is only possible if there are sufficient shifts in the entire holistic configurations in which individual and human material-poetic performances participate" (Coeckelbergh 2018, 509). DF is already shifting the entire configuration of popular, mainstream storytelling in fascinating ways and timely innovations.

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[7] While the publishing industry is often touted as majority female, the positive numbers do not persist in executive positions, bestselling authors, or prizes, or for people of color.

Mediography

This section contains all of the relevant works of digital fiction I have referred to in this book, which can also be found by creator name in the following Works Cited section. Here, however, I have broken them down by type or genre (roughly), alphabetized within each section by the title of the work. Some works may be listed in multiple categories.

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