

# On the Margins and at the Centre

Francesca Benatti and Alessio Antonini, The Open University

Since its early days as a series of experimental approaches, hypertext has become a necessary method to deal with deep structural changes in the arrangements of ideas and phenomena. There are numerous possible conceptualisations and definitions of hypertext, including non-sequential writing that branches, allows choices to the reader and is best read at an interactive screen, or a body of written and/or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be represented on paper. Irrespective of our definition, hypertext has by now become ubiquitous in our everyday lives.

In our research lives, hypertext technologies and methodologies are one of the most prominent and visible outcomes of the “digital age”. They are also amongst the most mature products of its investigation by research communities that comprise amongst others Electronic Literature scholars and practitioners, Hypertext and Hypermedia specialists and researchers in the Digital Humanities. However, because of their disparate angles of approach, these research communities often remain fragmented and to an extent “on the margins” of Humanities and Computer Science scholarship.

The editors of this special issue contend that this marginality can be exploited to carve out new areas for research and dialogue. Our vision was brought to life through a groundbreaking conference - *On the Margins: Hypertext, Electronic Literature, Digital Humanities (Margins 22)*<sup>1</sup> – held on 15-16 December 2022 at Senate House, University of London, UK through a collaboration between The Open University, the School of Advanced Studies and Richmond American University London. The conference attracted 31 submissions, of which 15 were accepted and presented. These diverse contributions highlighted cross-disciplinary interests and a growing reliance on hypertext as a method to address the study of digital literature and cultural heritage as well as to expand digital tools and paradigms to support creative thinking and work.

This special issue contains selected articles based on the responses to our invitation to the members of the Hypertext, Electronic Literature and Digital Humanities communities, including doctoral and Early Career Researchers. The contributors reflect on exemplary cases of how Hypertext has shaped research and creative practices, built opportunities for enquiry between sympathetic communities, and pushed disciplinary boundaries beyond their current incarnations. The conference opened new spaces for the promotion of debate and the forging of connections, building new understanding at the crossing of disciplines.

Using established book historical paradigms as a guiding framework<sup>2</sup>, this special issue explores the encounter of hypertext, digital humanities and electronic literature through the

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sas.ac.uk/about-us/institutes-centres/digital-humanities-research-hub/events/past-events/margins-conference>

<sup>2</sup> Darnton, R. (1982). What Is the History of Books? *Daedalus*, 111(3), 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20024803>

perspectives of authors and authoring, readers and reading experience, and the construction, exploration and curation of hypertext cultural artefacts.

The **Authoring on the Margins** section examines how the authors of selected hypertexts challenge rigid views of the communications circuit. Authoring, reading and publishing are no longer the purview of separate agents, but part of a fluid interplay enabled by hypertext technologies. The authors of the selected texts recast classic texts in new formats, embrace new modalities of textual transmission and creation, and even collaborate with artificial intelligence to refashion their own role.

In the first article “Hypertext and Its Afterlives: Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* and/as Undead Electronic Literature”, Calvin Olsen analyses Shelley Jackson’s seminal 1995 hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl* (*PG*), which is in itself a reinterpretation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, through the lens of intersectional feminism and digital humanities scholarship. Olsen argues for the continued relevance of *PG* as an electronic literature artifact in apparent opposition to Nick Montfort’s 2000 declaration of the death of hypertext and contends that *PG*’s various resurrections qualify it as an “undead hypertext”. The author applies Roopika Risam’s intersectional digital feminism lens to *PG* and argues that *PG* enables the resurrection of hypertext through its resistance against a monolithic view of the literary corpus and the identity of the subject. The literal and metaphoric multiplicity of *PG*’s titular protagonist is encapsulated by her body, which is composed of pieces of other women’s bodies that nonetheless retain their original memories and personalities. The article argues that the character of Patchwork Girl fully deserves to be regarded as the Everywoman. Her composite hypertextual multiplicity enables the protagonist of *PG* to take on the role of inclusionary subject and to substitute diversity and difference for the assumption of a single exclusionary subject.

In the second article “The Evolution of the Author—Authorship and Speculative Worldbuilding in Johannes Heldén’s *Evolution*”, Hilda Forss analyses the digital work *Evolution*, which was designed in 2014 to generate poetry mimicking the style of its creator, Johannes Heldén. Recent developments in large language models have made Heldén’s work even more topical, as Forss argues when examining how *Evolution* problematises the role of the author and the creative process within the current hypertext-infused technological landscape. *Evolution* is significant also because it represents the result of a collaboration between Heldén, a poet and composer, and programmer Håkan Jonson. According to its abstract, *Evolution* aims to replace the human author Heldén, making him redundant. While previous research has focused primarily on the media and technologies behind *Evolution*, this chapter deploys instead an analysis of its conceptual structure. Forss focuses particularly on the role of generative poetry and on how the work navigates the dichotomies between analogue and digital, as well as between text and paratext. Through the lens of narratology, the essay argues for *Evolution* as a work of speculative fiction, engaging the reader in thought experiments through its abstract and leading them to question the role of technology in authorship and creativity.

Henry Coburn applies a cognitive narratological approach in the third article, “Linear Multiform: A Cognitive Model for E-Fiction”. Relying on Janet Murray’s conception of the “multiform” digital text, where a user can experience multiple versions or alternative outcomes of a story, Coburn argues that too often branching narratives are dissatisfying. He

then reflects on his own experience as author of two electronic literature texts, *AMNESIAC* (2021) and *Mutiny on the Batavia* (2022), presenting a unique practitioner's voice. Coburn describes his efforts to overcome the shortcomings of branching narratives, identified principally as completionism and the onus of choice placed on the reader. Basing his work on a psychologically grounded position, Coburn's works experiment with versions of the multiform story that exploit digital affordances while preserving the sense of purpose of linear narratives. As an author of electronic literature, Coburn argues that experimental narratives afford authors unique opportunities to fulfil established expectations of what constitutes meaningful stories while allowing room for innovation. Electronic literature can utilise the allowances of unbound digital narrative to keep written stories innovative and at the same time to expose their essentially constructed nature. The article argues that digital texts can aid authors and readers in questioning the construction of reality and the very nature of media forms.

The **Reading and Reading Experiences** section expands the discussion of digital reading beyond digital/print dichotomies and reflects on the opportunities for active reader engagement enabled by digital platforms. Its contributors explore how reading hypertext expands the reading experience through new interfaces and new genres, such as Instapoetry and digital comics.

JuEunhae Knox explores an emerging genre of electronic literature in chapter 4 "Real' Reel Poetry: Examining Co-Digital Motherhood Communities through Reel Instapoetry". Knox presents a historical perspective on this recent genre, casting the original wave of Instapoetry as divisive because of its alleged linguistic simplicity. Yet the same traits have been viewed by other commentators as enabling greater accessibility. Regardless of its controversial reception, Knox assesses reel Instapoetry's ability to adapt to constantly shifting technological environments. While celebrity for some Instapoet-influencers seems to be achieved by eschewing digital fluidity in exchange for the fixity of print publications, this chapter argues that most Instapoets have continued to evolve their authoring practices to adapt to changes within the platform. Moreover, and perhaps surprisingly, Knox shows that this constant adaptation does not lead to a decreased feeling of intimacy within the readership. The case study on motherhood Instapoets reveals that through this medium, marginalised voices are capable of building small but active counterpublics where individuals mutually support each other through a "gift economy". Knox examines how certain new hypertextual features, such as reels, not only contribute to increased interpersonal user connections but even encourage more fluid digital collaborations. The article particularly notes how content creators and consumers tag, share, and adapt reels to mutually strengthen the overarching motherhood Instapoetry community.

In "Moving with the Story": The Haptics of Reader Experience and Response to Digital Comics", Linda Berube, Ernesto Priego, Stella Wisdom, Ian Cooke and Stephann Makri identify the traits that distinguish the reading experience of digital comics from both print comics and other types of electronic literature. Digital comics, the authors argue, rely on the interplay between text and art, which is the defining trait of all comics. Uniquely, they do so both 'on the page' and 'off the page', as exemplified by interaction opportunities that would be impossible in print, such as the 'Alt Text' feature in the popular webcomic, *xkcd*. Digital comics authors exploit the affordances of digital technologies to communicate movement and emotion to the readers. The article grounds its observations on a pioneering exploratory

study conducted using Human-Computer Interaction methodologies with British Library users, uncovering their varied reading experiences through multiple devices, apps, platforms and social media. The authors' research contributes to an empirical, qualitative understanding of how readers respond to digital comics and webcomics, presenting them as an example of the role of haptics of hypertext fiction, locating webcomics within the framework of hypertext, and establishing them as a legitimate object of study.

The final section of this special issue, **Collections and Archives**, explores the challenges of preserving, cataloguing, organising and exploring hypertextual digital artifacts. The articles in this section embrace three different perspectives at three contrasting scales, from legal deposit libraries in the United Kingdom, to self-organised community efforts to personal research practices. In all three examples, the emphasis is on the predominance of users rather than publishers as the dominant force in hypertext creation, transmission and increasingly curation, a phenomenon identified as “feral hypertext” by Jill Walker-Rettberg<sup>3</sup>.

In “User-centred Collecting for Emerging Formats” authors Giulia Carla Rossi, Ian Cooke, Lynda Clark, Tegan Pyke and Florence Smith Nicholls provide an overview of the work conducted at legal deposit libraries to better understand access requirements for emerging digital formats. An overview of UK non-print legal deposit is provided, underlining the libraries' efforts since 2013 to establish new collaborations, systems and approaches for the handling of born-digital artifacts. These emerging formats present unprecedented challenges for the libraries, caused by their multimedia complexity and by the still fluid state of the field. These are being approached through a focus on the capture of contextual information, as argued for example by Moulthrop and Grigar<sup>4</sup>. The article includes a report from a series of workshops conducted to discuss user needs and expectations when accessing born-digital collections in a library environment. The repurposing and adaptation of existing methodologies, such as web archiving, is also examined as a possible approach, though the sheer variety of digital objects requires multiple tools and strategies. Finally, a discussion of further research projects being conducted at the British Library examines the archiving of interactive narratives and how they and other born-digital contents can be displayed within exhibitions, such as the recent *Digital Storytelling* exhibition (June – October 2023), which provided useful lessons for librarians.

The field of fanfiction is explored by Fabienne Silberstein-Bamford in the next article, “Thank God for Tags” - Fanfiction as a Reading Paradigm”. The article examines fanfiction's close entanglement with current hypertext technologies, which have moved it beyond its humble beginnings as an analogue practice. Silberstein-Bamford analyses the best-known example of fanfiction infrastructure, the Archive of Our Own (AO3) platform, which hosts over 13 million stories. The article identifies AO3's hyperlinked tagging of content as one of the key determiners of its success and reports on an empirical participant study. Research data were gathered through an online survey that included 245 participants and 26 semi-structured interviews, which were analysed through using a constructivist grounded theory approach.

---

<sup>3</sup> Walker, J. (2005). Feral hypertext: When hypertext literature escapes control. *Proceedings of the Sixteenth ACM Conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia*, 46–53. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1083356.1083366>

<sup>4</sup> Moulthrop, S., & Grigar, D. (2017). *Traversals: The Use of Preservation for Early Electronic Writing*. MIT Press.

Through the use of tags, the author argues, new reading and archiving practices are enabled, which foreground the role of networks and distinguish AO3 from other print and digital platforms. These user-generated tags create metadata structures based on a 'curated folksonomy' moderated by volunteer 'tag wranglers' who belong to the AO3 community. In turn, these structures enable new forms of reading, such as 'rhizomatic', 'informed' and 'multiple' or 'parallel' reading, in a positive feedback loop from authorship to reading to curation.

In the final article of the collection, "From "Screen-as-Writing" Theory to Internet Culturology. A French perspective on Digital Textualities", Gustavo Gomez-Mejia questions how digital research objects can be conceptualised through the lenses of the Humanities. Gomez-Mejia endeavours to illuminate the cultural history and intellectual tradition of French digital textualities and make it more familiar to English-speaking audiences, who may have been excluded from its current and historical debates through language barriers and the dominance of English within internet culture. The article introduces and contextualises the framework of the "screen-as-writing" theory (théorie des écrits d'écran) through a review of Emmanuël Souchier's and Yves Jeanneret's seminal contributions, demonstrating the existence of a paradigm for the analysis digital textualities that runs parallel to English-language theories. Gomez-Mejia then undertakes an autoethnographic journey where Souchier and Jeanneret's "socio-semiotic" approaches are discussed and put into practice. Hypertextual objects such as software, cd-roms, websites, blogs, social media platforms and apps are analysed through key concepts such as architexts and passing signs in a rich journey on the borderline between research and archiving.

The *On the Margins* conference was a testbed for a new vision of a community of scholars and practitioners that could transcend disciplinary boundaries and address some of the most pressing issues facing technology, textuality and communication. The seeds sown at the conference are already bearing fruit through the most prestigious conferences in the book history and hypertext sector. Several panels at the annual SHARP (Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing) conferences in 2023 and 2024 have featured topics that are contiguous to those of this special issue. Most significantly, the long-standing ACM Hypertext & Social Media conference series has since 2023 included tracks dedicated to reading, authorship and an exhibition of electronic literature, under the direction of the editors of the present special issue. Such developments indicate that the research that first coalesced at *On the Margins* is now moving towards a position of centrality promoting the 'humanities of the digital'<sup>5</sup> approach and exploring a new 'humanities in the digital' direction that incorporates Humanities principles within the design of new media technologies. This proposition is a necessary supplement to the current focus in Digital Humanities on infrastructures, resources and computational methods. This approach will arguably become even more prominent with book historians embracing the scrutiny of hypertext and digital textuality, and computer scientists collaborating with the Humanities to lead the development of new tools and approaches.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Roth, C. (2019). Digital, digitized, and numerical humanities. *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 34(3), 616–632. <https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqy057>