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Will Digital Literature Go Mainstream?

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Will Digital Literature Go Mainstream?

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Will the most popular fiction of the future be published on the Web and comprise not just text but images and sound and the ability for readers to plot their own course through the narrative? Will the best-selling authors combine graphic design and computer programming with writing?

Actually, such fiction and such authors exist on the Internet today, but Wes Chapman, a professor of English at Illinois Wesleyan University who studies digital literature, is uncertain when, or if, such literature will become mainstream. Thus far, the audience for this work has been small, which does not surprise Chapman.

“The audience for any *avant-garde* literature is small, and this certainly counts as *avant-garde*,” he says.

Chapman acknowledges that some of the most important works of literature were not acknowledged in their time and that could be true today with digital literature.

“Maybe some of the early digital fictions — Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* or Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story*, for example — will endure,” says Chapman. “But I would have to say that I don’t think we have anything in digital literature that you could point to and say, ‘Aha, there is the *Ulysses* of its time.”

“Things have to shape the taste of the time before they can become accepted. I don’t know if the current taste is moving towards the digital fictions that are out there or away from them.”

According to Chapman, there is not agreement about when digital literature first began. Some point to the publications in 1987 of Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* while others contend that early computer games like *Zork*, introduced in the late 1970s, qualify as digital literature because they do tell a story.

“Whether you set the date as the late 70s or 1987, however, we are no more than 35 years in the evolution of digital literature,” Chapman says. “So we’re in an awkward time similar to the period just after the printing press was invented and books all looked like manuscripts. It took 50 or 60 years before they started looking like books. Given that, we have another 10 or 15 years of not knowing exactly what we’re doing in this medium.”

Perhaps the major shift in digital literature has, in Chapman’s view, come as a result of the commercialization of the World Wide Web. Rather than fairly simple graphics and interfaces that characterized the earliest works of digital literature, commercial Web design has created a different aesthetic that today’s digital authors emulate.

“The Web, and by association any digital text, is held to a much higher standard of graphic design, for the simple reasons that the Web has been colonized by corporations, who pay professional artists and designers,” Chapman wrote in a recent paper. “I am not suggesting that digital literature has gotten ‘commercial’ in the usual sense of the term. Now, as then, no one is making any money off of digital literature...But the aesthetics of the digital literature community have changed under the pressure of the example of commercial Web design.”

Another consequence has been that the creators of digital literature have changed as well. In the early stages of digital literature, those who published came primarily from literature backgrounds. But, as Chapman observes, more of today’s authors come with graphic design background or perhaps computer programming background.

To discuss digital literature with Chapman, please call either Jeff Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.