

Jennie Fleming

***The Route of One  
Along the Paths of Many***

N. Katherine Hayles defines electronic literature as a “first generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer” (Hayles, 3). She elaborates with a definition developed by a committee at the Electronic Literature Organization, head by Noah Wardrip-Fruin, which concludes it is a “work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer” (3). Hayles then describes a number of “digital born” forms, including network or hypertext fiction; interactive fiction (which includes more game elements); “code work”, a hybridized form of a ‘natural language’ and programming expressions; and generative art, where algorithms are used to generate texts or to rearrange existing texts (Hayles, Ch. 1). She also discusses immersive works in physical three-dimensional spaces, and electronic works on mobile playing devices, in which she describes as “reminiscent of digital art works, although their emphasis on literary texts and narrative constructions can easily be seen as a species of electronic literature” (12). Hayles recognizes readers come to digital works with expectations formed by print, but also informed by contemporary culture at large—computer games, films, animation, digital arts, graphic design, and other forms of digital culture.

Christiane Paul has written numerous articles and books on the presentation, collection, and preservation of digital art. In her 2008 book, *Digital Art* (second edition), Paul defines digital art as work “being produced, stored, and presented exclusively in digital format, and making use of its interactive or participatory features” (Paul, 8). She elaborates on forms of digital film, video, and animation; Internet art and software art; virtual reality and musical environments; and hybrid forms of interactive installation with or without network components. In the chapter “Themes in Digital Art,” Paul talks about text and narrative environments. She begins with hypertext environments that were available before the Web, such as Storyspace, “as electronically linked, nonlinear text, hypertext both embodies and tests aspects of postmodern critical theory” (189).

Both Katherine Hayles and Christiane Paul use similar language to describe ‘sub-genres’ of electronic literature and digital art in their respective disciplines. Both discuss the employment of digital media in their fields as distinct forms that can be interactive, participatory, dynamic, and customizable. Hayles provides the concept of intermediation as a path for a “reimagining of the literary work as an instrument to be played, where the textual dynamics guide the player to increased interpretive and functional skills;” including deconstruction between sound and mark, rupture of narratives, and reconstructed temporalities from multiple interactions (Hayles, 84). Paul cautions that while definitions and categories help identify certain characteristics of media, they also set up pre-conceived notions for

approaching and understanding any art form. “While the formal aspects of a work are always inextricably interconnected with its content (the medium also being the message), classifications based on form are not necessarily helpful in consistently outlining the themes that have developed in a given art” (Paul, 67).

Why these classifications may not be helpful, is argued further by Talan Memmott. In an interview, Mark Amerika divulges to Memmott that they had trouble naming a competition, and settled on new media writing. Memmott answers that the term is “acceptable precisely because it is so generic. If you go with any of the many terms for this stuff—*hypertext*, *cybertext*, *hypermedia*, *web.art*, *net.art*, etc.—you open yourself up to varying, sometimes highly specific interpretations of the term. I mean one man’s *web.art* is another man’s *hypertext*” (Amerika, 241). Memmott, in another essay, argues that it is the context that provides the framework for definition; the term digital poetry is applied to so many works, that the only definition is a minimal one, “that the object in question be ‘digital,’ mediated through digital technology, and that it be called ‘poetry’ by its author or a critical reader” (Memmott, 293). Memmott continues,

Within digital poetry, finally, the application of a given technology varies from one practitioner to the next, even from one work to the next by the same practitioner. Two works that use the same technology may produce entirely different poetic events. Because digital poetry cannot be reduced to a *genre* of poetry, we must begin to consider the *applied poetics* of the individual practitioner (294).

As Memmott argues for an expanded field of textuality beyond the word, to include visual and sound media, he also is clear on the point that digital is not a genre, and software are tools, like musical instruments, for development or for participation. “The potential of digital poetry resides in its computational aspects: its conditions of interaction, playability, and environment. It is an operational interface for a system of signifying harmonics” (294).

Seth Thompson writes for *Afterimage* about a “paradigm” happening in the fields of art, entertainment, and publishing, where non-linear writing, interactive storytelling, immersive environments and virtual reality are becoming part of daily life. Of note in this brief article, is Thompson writing about artists from diverse artistic backgrounds—painting, dance, music, bookmaking, and writing—as departing from their conventional disciplines to use current computer technology to enhance their artistic vision and push the boundaries of their respective disciplines (Thompson). While artists are departing from their disciplines, scholars are working across disciplines in an attempt to define, categorize, and interpret interdisciplinary works. I count myself among both groups, and recognize that I need to look deeper, beyond the shared tools of software and hardware, beyond discipline-specific creative and interpretative strategies.

Marjorie Perloff argues that it is problematic to assume that in new electronic poetics, shared techniques mean shared aesthetics. As current discourses in electronic literature and digital art still seem to fetishize the digital presentation, Perloff offers the caution that no medium or technique of production can give an artist inspiration or imagination to produce works of art. "And poetry is an especially vexed case because, however we choose to define it, poetry is the *language art*: it is, by all accounts, language that is somehow extraordinary, that can be processed only upon rereading" (Perloff, 143). Perloff argues that poets use a particular medium not because it is "better," but it is the one that is the most relevant at that moment. Perhaps it would be better to the path of why certain digital multi-media forms are the most relevant forms, for that artist, at that moment. A change in the question does not invalidate the difficulties faced in determining what interpretive strategies seem most relevant, at that moment.

Adelaide Morris in the introduction to *New Media Poetics*, invokes Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" as a path for not fixing definitions of new media poems; this can also be extended to other digital/electronic/new media forms (Morris, 20). Artists and scholars can and should recognize clusters of what similarities animate and affiliate these works, and what differences divide but not divorce. My interests include analyzing, as well as producing, works that are difficult to qualify or quantify by genre or media. What is now in place for me is a critical engagement with issues of communication and popular culture, investigations into the interplay between Internet-based digital works and user interaction, and how some forms of digital works blend literary narrative and scholarly discourse with nonlinear dynamic spatial structures.

Talan Memmott offers one of the most important paths for me to date, when he speaks of the divide between digital creative work and page-based criticism, with "gestures, methods, and modes of signification at work in one form are largely absent in the other" (Memmott, 305). Memmott calls for more critical work produced in 'hypermedia' in the attempt to open doors to new and diverse critical methods.

The opportunity offered by the development of critical hypermedia is yet to be explored. Although the critical essay has not lost its place, power, and portability, I think a sharper critical understanding of digital practice may be gained from participation in digital culture, whether the output be a page-based essay for a hypermedia application.... For the critic of creative digital practice, it is important not to be just a tourist but to understand the significant opportunities within hypermedia for critical expression related to such notions as the *ideoscope* and *mise en écran*. Similar to the individualize applied poetics of creative digital practice, an applied critical practice would not just invent deep theoretical and critical methods through an engagement with media technologies but allow those methods to live the temporary, nomadic, and applied lives that are so evident in creative applications. (Memmott, 305)

After trial and error through this last year, more creative and critical practices in a digital form is now a priority for me. The experiments in this early eportfolio draft mark some of the paths taken this year. Some paths will be explored further in the coming months, others will be abandoned. Maybe the road less traveled, is the road less traveled for a reason. Perhaps other less traveled roads offer desired experiences, or experiences never imagined. The different strands of the presented research work together to offer new insights into the production and concept of Internet-based digital works, and set the stage for an original project, *The Route of One, Along the Paths of Many*. This new project is an attempt to not just be a tourist of digital media, but an immersion to ultimately develop a new practice, of creative and critical digital practice, which provides a new contribution to multiple disciplines.

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