

Preface

In this volume we are dealing with ruptures and upheavals in literary communication through computerized networked media. As a result of the programmed manipulations of signs and the networking of computers and their users forms of literature have developed that can only be described as results of feedback processes between man and machine. No longer can we define computer nets as mere channels for messages generated by more or less brilliant creators. Unlike processes of linguistic signs in print media with their comparably stabilized textual meanings computers can process signifiers according to programmed instructions that cannot be controlled any longer in a universal way by “authors,” “lectors,” or “readers.” We therefore have to ask in which of these literature projects indeed a new, a different *literary* quality is developing. The question will be in what way the fundamental openness of networked communications can be successfully amalgamated with the aesthetic demands of closure, perfection or coherence of literary creations as they at one point were formulated for works that were written by hand or that were printed so that after their publication any change of the signifying chains was excluded.

The contributions of this volume are grouped around this question beginning with terminological and conceptual questions discussing terms like “digital literature,” “net literature,” “ergodic literature,” or “hyperfiction.” *Peter Gendolla* and *Jörgen Schäfer* are trying to argue why we should talk of “net literature” regarding the above-mentioned literary communications and where in this case the specific cognitive interest might lie. The term is focusing on the decisive difference to traditional literary texts that lies in the recursive processes between humans and machines. Consequently we have to look at the *non-hierarchical* exchange-processes between *all* participating elements—between “authors,” “works,” and “readers”—in the analysis of literary processes in computer nets. Not only individual roles of activities in the literary system are redistributed here; we also experience characteristic hybridizations encompassing the whole system: In many cases we cannot decide without doubt which textual elements can be attributed to the intentions of an “author,” to calculations of a computer or to the (re-)actions of a “reader.”

Additionally, Gendolla and Schäfer are discussing the question in what way the specific *aesthetic* difference characterizing literature in traditional print-media as “language *art*” can be also identified under the current altered medial conditions. Their proposal maintains that literature, in the sense of “networked”

trial-activities, can aesthetically reflect the far-reaching (man-machine-)communications that occur in networked computer systems, thereby making invisible processes visible and communicable. For it seems that only in current computer-aided and networked media literary forms emerge that cannot any longer be described adequately as aesthetic re-internalizations of perceptions since in networked processes these are immediately followed by externalization into activities of the recipient.

Conversely, *Roberto Simanowski* favors the term “digital literature” on the grounds of a *mediatechnological* concept of “digitality,” thereby differing from the concerns of Gendolla and Schäfer. His considerations are centered on the question of the genuineness and relevance of “digital” media for “literary texts.” With this Simanowski not only is reaching out for a widening of the traditional hermeneutical approach in literary studies trying to interpret the meaning of signs. He rather is looking for a hermeneutics of intermedial, interactive and performative signs that also considers the meaning of the “*behavior*” of the sign on the screen as in the intermedial connections of words with visual signs or as reactions to the activities of readers, machines, or—as in “*biopoetry*”—bacteria.

Frank Furtwängler is dealing with one of the subjects with the most theoretical impact concerning our topic: the idea of “ergodic” literature that Espen Aarseth has developed in his publication *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* as well as in numerous essays on literature in computer-aided media and lately especially regarding computer games. To be precise, Furtwängler here is criticizing the misleading adaptation of the “ergodicity”-concept into literary and game studies through which Aarseth wanted to re-determine the function of the recipient of “cybertexts” on the grounds of a changed materiality of the medium. This concept is derived from physics and there precisely characterizes the *unpredictability* of random processes. In computer games, however, consisting of scripted sequences and similarly non-chaotic structures the attentiveness of the player is directed to a high degree by the technical system. The adaptation of the theory of ergodicity, according to Furtwängler, therefore would only make sense if we were talking about leaving the player out of the system altogether. Conversely, he is advising game studies to model itself on the concepts of literary anthropology as developed for instance by Wolfgang Iser.

Philippe Bootz, by introducing an elaborate procedural model of literary communication between man and machine, also aims into that direction. He is discussing literary forms as processes of programming aesthetic rules that are independent of the surface aesthetics of the screen. In this model, writing and reading are two functions within a system: Authors and readers produce mental representations that he calls *texte-écrit* (text-as-written) and *texte-lu* (text-as-read). Between these cognitive processes, however, an “author”-, a “text”-

and a “reader”-domain is placed so that a procedural text can only be explained as the working together of three functions or processes: The author creates a *texte-auteur* (author-text) to which everything belongs which he has encoded in a significant form. He therefore can control the structure of the text but not all parameters of execution like the varieties of “programming” or reader activities. This transformed notion of the text therefore does not only encompass the *texte-auteur* but also the autonomous technological processes. The reader, on his end, observes a *texte-à-voir* (text-to-be-seen), i.e. a temporary, multimedial status that is bound to time and space and that includes the interface.

Mela Kocher attempts to structure the range of literature in computer-aided media. She introduces a “ludoliterary circle” that is able to cover similarities as well as differences between adventure games, hyperfictions, interactive movies, society simulations, cyberdrama and role-playing games by means of the parameters interactivity, perspective and narrative mode.

The fact that all these novel literary forms can in no way be contemplated without a long literary tradition or concrete historical predecessors is substantiated by *Jörgen Schäfer* with numerous examples of combinatorial, hypertextual and collaborative texts from German literary history since baroque times. Therewith he is providing us with a historical basis in order to work out the common features and differences that with computers have entered literary texts.

Friedrich W. Block is describing comical and diabolical aspects in current media art. He is using Peter Dittmer’s *Die Amme* as an example for an installation that stages machines as grotesque caricatures of a robot capable of communicating. Block furthermore shows with the help of Cornelia Sollfrank’s network-happening *female extension*, in which the artist identified the productions of a net-art generator as the artistic work of women, submitting them (without success!) to an international art competition, how both gender-politics of the art system as well as habitual man-machine symbols are stymied.

As might have become clear already in the conceptual contributions, the analysis of the new forms, procedures and objects that are manifest in literary processes in the net can rely on theories and methods of game studies. For example, the “ludologists” like Espen Aarseth, Jesper Juul or Gonzalo Frasca mainly focus on working out the ludic character of net literature or computer games—quite in the spirit of the double meaning of *ludus* and *paidia*, i.e. game and play. The scholarly work on these genres in the meantime has established its own transmedial discourse regarding its topics not only as mere derivatives of narratives or plays. Thus *Markku Eskelinen* in his characteristic provocative attitude demands of literary scholars to turn the tables and—if they cannot part with their traditional terminology—instead of persistently

searching for narrative elements in computer games to define all narratives as “games of interpretation.”

In six steps he is dealing with Aarseth’s concepts of cybertext and game studies that challenge literary theory. Among other things he demands giving up the fear of variety and multiplicity, thereby renouncing the idea of literary entities or totalities and instead trying one’s luck with the proposals of individual parts and phases. One possibility of such literary works seems to be on its way in the agenda of “playable media,” “instrumental texts,” and “textual instruments” developed by *Noah Wardrip-Fruin* in analyzing those works with which admittedly we are playing (and are producing for playing) but that cannot be called games in the more narrow sense of the word. Here we are rather dealing with textual and literary structures in which elements of play are used as means of interaction. In all his projects—like *Screen, Regime Change* and *News Reader*—Wardrip-Fruin is concerned with the artistic investigation of the specificities of (electronic) media—be they the World Wide Web or even the virtual reality environment of CAVE. This has led to the construction of texts as instruments, and we all know that instruments can be played: They constitute the frame for the activities of the user allowing the production of interesting variations of the original material. This approach avoids the reliance on formal definitions of games. The aim is neither to reach a certain goal nor to come to a specific result. We are rather talking about the playability of the texts, e.g. the question *how* they are played.

The challenge mentioned above is that of ludology to traditional narratology. It has to ask whether and in what way the logics of playing and that of the reading of narrative texts that seem at first glance to contradict each other (keywords would be: playing as acting vs. reading as interpretation) now can be brought together productively for the analysis of net literature—especially regarding the combination of man and machine.

Marie-Laure Ryan is pursuing the observation that even though “digital” forms of texts are reaching an academic public with avant-garde literary experiments and a mass public with computer games they have not yet, according to her thesis, found a cultured public that primarily reads for fun. Contrary to Eskelinen, in her contribution she is looking for possibilities to overcome this gap by strengthening the narrativity of digital texts. She is looking at three possibilities of interactive narratives: embedded stories as they appear in mystery games, emergent stories such as *The Sims*, and texts with a prescribed, but variable story, represented by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern’s interactive drama *Façade*.

Fotis Jannidis is equally critically analyzing both the “pure” ludologists and the model suggested by Ryan. In a sort of “close reading” of two computer

games he is developing a differentiated position: Compared to “prototypes” of narration the organization of event-sequences in games establishes phenomena of liminality that as such, however, can be nevertheless described and analyzed from a narratological point of view.

Additional contributions are concerned with the relationship of writing and programming; they deal with literary texts created by computer programs or “literary machines” as well as with the consequences this has for concepts like “author,” “work,” or “reading.” *Jean-Pierre Balpe*, for example, is defining generative literature as the production of texts that continually change since they are based on a specific dictionary, on a set of rules and the use of algorithms. He shows that texts like his generative novel *Trajectoires* that were produced by a computer and not written by an author demand a specific type of “engrammation” and reading. The point of departure of *Loss Pequeño Glazier* is that the mutation or modulation of words as a rule leads to orthographical relationships between variants. Sometimes, however, they also engender hardly tangible interactions, which he is trying to confirm in poems that use sequences and gaps in signifying chains. From these observations he is developing his concept of the reading of codes as poetic material.

Finally, the last three texts allow for variations of the perspective regarding our subject by firstly giving an insight into quite different practical realms like the didactics of literature as well as into the work of an internationally renowned author. *Laura Borràs Castanyer* shows how computer-aided media can be made useful for an innovative teaching of literature at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya in Barcelona, a completely virtual distance learning university. She is trying to find out where the chances and dangers of E-Learning/Teaching can be located. *Susanne Berkenbeger* introduces her latest play: the dramatic chat-distillation *i'm dying, honey: dramatized proceedings from super-space*. It was generated in chats and consists to 90 percent of original dialogues in the chat-room. The main character in the play is playing with chunks of communication as if she were a computer program and the chatters speculate wildly about her identity, become impatient, curse and carry on, thereby co-writing a play that in the meantime has been performed at several German theaters and that in the end will find its way back into the net as an audio-installation.

Thomas Kamphusmann's contribution at first glance seems out of place. From the perspective of information management, i.e. the analysis of the flow of communication in business, his contribution is questioning the possibilities but most of all the limits of improving or augmenting the exchange of information within business communication. In order to optimize these processes he is pleading for the inclusion of supplementary structures like aesthetic or literary forms into the development of the more abstract models put into operation.

This book is based on a three-day conference *Netzliteratur: Umbrüche in der literarischen Kommunikation* [*Net Literature: Upheavals in Literary Communication*] that took place between November 25-27, 2004 at Siegen University. We want to thank the Volkswagen Foundation and especially Dr. Vera Szöllösi-Brenig for the generous financial support for this international symposium that allowed our guests to travel on in some cases somewhat arduous paths from the US, France, Finland, Spain, Switzerland and Germany to Siegen in southern Westphalia.

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