
Rewards: Books, Boundedness and Reading in Participatory Culture

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As a professor whose appointment encompasses both electronic literature and printed book publishing, I think a lot about interactive reading and reward systems. Reward systems are fundamental to video-games, where the consequences of reader/gamer choice materialize the stakes of interpretation (Juul, 2005). Computational reader response critics like Bell, Ensslin, Bouchardon and Saemmer frame their discussions of reading as medium-specific and, as I have argued, device specific (Berens). This emergent subfield is “literary interface criticism” (Pold), informed by comparative textual studies (Hayles and Pressman), performance studies (Fletcher), and interface criticism (Galloway; Critical Code Studies Working Group; Chun).

The book publishing world is only now, in the age of mobile-first web access, beginning to reckon with the implications of readers’ daily exposure to pervasive, quotidian experiences of interactive reading and gaming environments in video games and social media. These entail nonhuman disruptions in the value chain of traditional industrial book production and distribution. John Maxwell observes that “large swaths of DH [digital humanities] practice overlap or are adjacent to practices in [book] publishing (e.g. markup, database design, user experience design, editing), yet publishing studies and the digital humanities often appear to run at right angles to one another. There is surely an opportunity for complementary work here.” My object in this talk is to articulate points of contact between DH and book publishing. Literary interface criticism offers a window onto interactivity and reward systems that extend how we understand the actions of reading: physical, cognitive, social. A book’s medium-specific affordances (random-access device; portable; cheap; no Digital Rights Management) are attractive. But how might books take ad-

vantage of digital interactivity to provide more rewarding interaction than the “reflowable content” of an e-reader platform?

“Playable books”—the subject of my monograph-in-progress—are part of the “complementary” space Maxwell identifies between book publishing and DH. A playable book is a story object that can be held in human hands, requires physical interaction between human and computer to render, and outputs a story experience that can be “bound” or is otherwise finite. A printed book with interactive elements is playable (see, for example, Tyehimba Jess’s *Olio* and Zachary Thomas Dodson’s *Bats of the Republic*); a novel displayed on an e-reader is not; an improvised, participatory story in social media is not. (My monograph situates playable books in both literary games and fanfiction archives and databases: such situation is beyond the scope of this short paper—see Note).

In this paper I compare reading’s reward structures in one bestseller and a popular, socially dynamic e-literature. I suggest how physically playful digital interactivity could inform mainstream book production and marketing. *Selp-Helf*, a 2015 *New York Times* best-selling book published by Gallery Books (an imprint owned by Simon and Schuster) is a successful YA [young adult] title. It is designed for hands-on, playful interaction; and its author, YouTube sensation Miranda Sings [Colleen Ballinger] sparked such a successful pre-sale campaign that her book debuted at #1 on the *Publisher’s Weekly* Nonfiction Hardcover list, and #1 on the *New York Times’* Advice, How-To and Miscellaneous list, where it remained for eleven weeks. But *Selp-Helf* is just one piece of a successful transmedia campaign spanning a Netflix series *Haters Back Off*, a fifty-seven city comedy tour, and several musical albums. Interactivity, in this case, is spread among various media. Book publishing gets a small slice of the pie.

How might mass market book publishing increase its relevance in the contemporary media ecology? I present a short reading of *Ink After Print* (2012), an interactive story machine installed in public spaces such as a rock festival and public libraries, as a way of suggesting what next-generation story interactivity could look like for book publishers who currently funnel their social activity around book into social media campaigns they don’t own, because they are hosted in platforms that dictate the terms of interactivity and serve their own agendas. A book like *Selp-Helf* has potential to benefit from reading rewards that are materialized in the book interface itself rather than a paratextual social media campaign.

Rationale & Analysis

Ink After Print is a full-body, playable literary interface. Exhibited at rock festivals, public libraries and train stations (in a French copy of the Danish original), *Ink* brings full-body haptics to the unbound book in ways that resonate with the embodied online social marketing of YA [young adult] titles. Both *Ink* and *Selp-Helf* ask the reader to do real things in the world, and leave traces of those activities in the literary interface, whether it's navigating through the sea of words in "Ink" and printing the results, or posting photos of oneself when meeting the YA author, or dressing up as a character (in this case, teen girls dressing as Miranda Sings.)

In both cases, writer/readers or "w/readers" (Landau, 1999) are having authentic experiences with literary interfaces. "Spreadable media" (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013) is a byproduct that empowers Ballinger's fans to use her book as a springboard to articulate their own perspectives on identity and gender. Use of digital skills is the precondition for fan interaction. Jenkins reminds us that *audiences* are individuals, "produced through measurement and surveillance, usually unaware of how the traces they leave can be calibrated by the media industries." *Publics* are collectives that "actively direct attention onto the messages they value" (166). An entire subculture of book fans—often of young adult literature—is using books as totems around which to build worlds made by and through participatory media; *Selp-Helf* is one strong example. *Selp-Helf* and other YA books like it are centerpieces of book-specific media microecologies with particularized rules of conduct, aesthetics, and dynamic interaction. "Playability" focuses through the book, but exceeds the bounded dimensions of the book itself.

As more book marketing focuses on live events captured for and refracted through social media, this paper proposes that book interactivity should do more to engage the actual practice of reading to draw audiences into memorable relationships with the works. Analysis will focus on how the physical aspects of unbound book reading disclose new quantitative and qualitative shifts in mass market book reading practices.

Book publishers, loathe to develop content that they can't expressly monetize, run cheap social media campaigns in platforms they don't own like YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. That's where book publishers should look to literary experimental pieces like *Ink* for how to create "eventness" (pace Bakhtin) around distribution and play beyond social media.

This would involve investment in digital-first book design and possibly a reading apparatus that could be physically moved location to location. Such techniques could scale, having a few select interactive reading "shows" that are captured in and for the social media audiences. Book publishers have built the expectation among YA readers that social media is their gathering space. Following the example of *Ink After Print*, publishers could offer actual, embodied, interactive reading experiences.

Ink After Print provides a rich context for readers to experiment with their affective experience of boundedness. The mechanics of *Ink* gameplay are sufficiently challenging that readers might feel a sense of reward in assembling a poem using the hand-held "books"; in this sense, the printed receipt is token of achievement. But it is also a highly portable object and a potential gift: to the ephemeral community of others playing *Ink After Print*, where you can share your poems with others who have played; and to the virtual community where *Ink* "receipts" are stored in the blog. When I curated a media arts show and exhibited *Ink*, I observed readers also folding their receipts into small objects that they then shared with others. The untrackability of what people do with their *Ink* "receipts" stands in stark contrast to the databased traces of participation left by fans of *Selp-Helf*. While *Ink* does output to a blog, its outputs focus on the words themselves, not the user identity. In this sense, *Ink* resists the types of identity quantification that feeds and funds corporate sponsorship of social media platforms.

Note

[1] Working groups of note in this space are: the Games and Literary Theory group founded by Espen Aarseth, and the Critical Code Studies Working Group. Books of note: Astrid Ensslin's *Literary Gaming*; Timothy Welsh's *Mixed Realism: Videogames and the Violence of Fiction*; Anastasia Salter, *What Is Your Quest? From Adventure Games to Interactive Books*; the excellent collection *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, edited by Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin. Alice De Kosnik's *Rogue Archives*, and Amy Earhart's *Traces of the Old, Uses of the New* discuss the effect of fan archives and tribute sites that (as Earhart shows) are subject to abandonment, decay and obsolescence.

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