

Dr. Uta Woiwod: “Examples of Using Digital Literature in Class”

A study by the German foundation Stiftung Lesen shows that ereaders can raise children’s interest in reading.¹ However, the initial enthusiasm of the young readers within the study had to be attributed particularly to the new and exciting electronic device (rather than reading text). This means as soon as the ereaders lost their initial fascination, their young users were likely to turn away from reading – and the problem of sustainability occurs.

What does appear ‘sustainable’, then, is the use of digital devices, such as smartphones, which confirms that it is the electronic medium, not necessarily the electronic text that incites a new and special reading experience. This observation is also supported by the comparison between designs of print and electronic literatures, which shows that images/illustrations or nonlinear structures, which are said to be so unique of electronic text designs, can occur in print texts, too, in manifold ways. While, for example, electronic texts can offer multiple pathways through a story by means of hyperlinks, print books use footnotes to add content which can be read immediately or at a later point in time (i.e. without interrupting the actual reading process); likewise, the use of visual effects is common to both kinds of media. Print has inspired and still inspires digital fiction (and the other way around).

When we think of digital fiction consumed by students (or young people in general), we usually think of computer games, often being image- and sound-based rather than text-based. Multimodality, though, should be reduced to a low level when trying to train reading skills on electronic devices since the accessibility of several modes at the same time – watching, listening, maybe even interacting – may pose a considerable challenge to students whose reading skills are not advanced. The simultaneous display of different modes can be distracting from the actual text.²

What kind of digital fiction may then be suitable for practising reading, f.ex. in classrooms?³ There is a liminal space between print fiction and games – and that is electronic or digital literature. The field comprises various attempts at placing narrative text in digital media by a certain degree of multimodality, hypertextuality, and interaction with the fictional text/literary work by the reader.⁴ By hyperlinks, for example, longer texts can be accessed bit by bit.

One first example of a combined read of print and digital narratives is provided in Andy Stanton’s children’s book *What’s for Dinner, Mr Gum?* (2007).⁵ In the print book, a link is mentioned which leads the reader to an extra-chapter which can only be accessed online.⁶ Contentwise, this chapter is not essential but it is a nice extra-read and the link triggers the young readers’ curiosity.

Another example is the Augmented-Reality project *Between Page and Screen* by Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse in which the authors explore the relations between page and screen in view of etymology. QR-codes collected in a print book can be scanned via webcam and, by means of a website, the codes reveal text which appears on screen.

For the user’s own text creations, Borsuk and Bouse created a free tool, the so-called

¹ Stiftung Lesen (2011).

² For more detail, comp. Prieto and López (2015: 135).

³ Digital narratives could be a valuable addition in literature classes (comp. Unsworth 2006: 1-2).

⁴ For definitions of eliterature see, among others, George P. Landow (1992) and N. Katherine Hayles (2008).

⁵ The volume is part of Stanton’s popular *Mr-Gum* series.

⁶ The so-called “Missing Chapter” can be accessed by the following link: <<https://www.egmont.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/missingchapter/mr%20gum%20missing%20chapter.pdf>>.

“epistler”, which can be found on the website betweenpageandscreen.com. The epistler can be used to present texts or poems in a new fashion or to play with 3-D text by turning it around, so words can be read backwards. Young children may enjoy word play or calligrammes: What about constructing a Swiss flag out of the word “Switzerland” by multiplying the word and arranging all words in such a way that the resulting text image forms the flag’s shape? Secondary-school students may be encouraged to create their own texts/poems.

Digital literature offers a variety of forms and formats which can be combined with print in order to achieve a sustainable reading practice. Using the potential of digital literature for encouraging reading may just require a little creativity.

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