

Evolving Literary Medium:
The Progression into E-literature

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Is literature ready to enter the digital medium? It's easy to see that society in multiple aspects has adapted digital technology into its everyday routine. Smartphones and social media have infiltrated the small gaps of free time people have, art programs have taken the place of traditional canvases, and digital intercommunicating bots have replaced most buyers and sellers in the New York stock exchange. However, researchers and scholars condemn the Internet and electronic devices for reeking negative and undesirable effects on the intellectual mind. As Nicholas Carr, an American writer on technology, puts it, "*Does the Internet Make You Dumber?*" (2010). It is important to discuss about and amend the current problems with the digital medium in order to optimize e-literature's potential to benefit the literary medium. By doing so, digitally integrating literature will accelerate the discovery and the repair of future problems, develop new reading skills that enhance the literary discipline, and provide not only convenient benefits, but also promulgate skills necessary for the future.

Legitimizing e-literature will inevitably bring to light the problems of e-literature. However, the digital medium itself is littered with problems. The Internet, for example, is a multimodal medium. Nearly every webpage and article makes use of hyperlinks, pictures, videos, interactive games, etc. to further enhance the reading experience. Granted, in the article *The Web Shatters Focus, Rewires Brains*, Nicholas Carr argues such extraneous features only weaken one's concentration (2010, 7). "Because it disrupts concentration, such activity [clicking on hyperlinks] weakens comprehension" (Carr, 2010, 7). Nicholas goes on to quote the multiple researches that lead to the same conclusion; hyperlinks, despite their small size, are a huge distraction and detriment to comprehension. Possibly worse, if not the same, conclusion can be postulated for images, videos, and interactive games. Unfortunately, the Internet is more than just one webpage linked to a few others.

The Internet is congested with distractions such as social media, emails, online videos, games, and etc. Much more distracting than hyperlinks, these resources tempt students to multi-task between work and entertainment which further degrades student's comprehension skills, as well as memory. Adam Gorlick, a Assistant Director for Communications at Stanford University, states that "People who are regularly bombarded with several streams of electronic information do not pay attention, control their memory or switch from one job to another as well as those who prefer to complete one task at a time (2010, 2)" Research conducted at Stanford University's Communication Between Humans and Interactive Media Lab tested whether digital multitasking negatively impacted one's concentration, memory retention, and ability to switch from one task to the next. With a sample of a hundred students, each categorized either as a heavy multi-tasker or an infrequent multi-tasker, the researchers found that the heavy multi-taskers were outcompeted in all tests. The results revealed that multi-tasking is equivalent to clicking hyperlinks; it only fragment's one thoughts and is another hindrance to comprehension.

More relevant to reading within the digital realm, close reading is being replaced with hyper reading. Close reading - a prized skill among literary scholars - is a method of slowly reading with "deep attention", focusing on "single cultural objects for relatively long periods of time" (Hayles, 2012, p 12). On the other hand, hyper reading is a method of swiftly skimming and scanning through texts, "aiming to conserve attention by quickly identifying relevant information; a strategic response to an information-intensive environment" (Hayles, 2012, p 12). As scholars argue, close reading is becoming obsolete as people are reading more frequently in fragments due to the multiple distractions of the Internet (Carr, 2010, 5). Although, hyper reading is beneficial in some situations, close reading is necessary for extracting themes and

ideas from literature; hyper reading alone cannot achieve this. Thus, the extinction of close reading poses a great threat to the literary discipline.

The Internet and digital media are hazards to reading as it is now. It is no surprise that e-literature has not been legitimized among literary scholars. The fear that literature will be negatively altered is a rational one. Even so, such threats should not hamper the progression of literature into the digital medium. Just as there are negatives, there are positives. In addition, unlike the Internet, steps can be taken to fix any arising problems within e-literature.

As Nicholas Carr has stated, hyperlinks - as well as images, videos, and advertisements - are a ubiquitous distraction to readers online (Carr, 2010, 7). However, small solutions such as listing hyperlinks at the bottom of pages like footnotes, or creating the option to hide extraneous objects other than text, are very feasible to implement. The whole spectrum of digital media and the Internet would not have to change into a more learning-friendly environment; rather to what literary scholars agree how literary webpages and online books should be modified. This helps encourage and accelerate the solutions to many problems inherent to e-literature as it would be less difficult to carry out. Furthermore, e-literature opens the opportunity for scholars and researchers to transform the educational digital medium. In the process, teachers could also introduce methods to transverse such sites and encourage certain study strategies that minimize students' distractions online. Thus, e-literature could help facilitate solutions to change the digital literary realm into a more viable environment for reading.

E-literature also provides convenient benefits. Physical print can take up a lot of space, and can be uncomfortably heavy. Electronic storage for e-books reduce the bulk and mass down to a pleasant 1 pound tablet, laptop, or even smartphone. E-literature also utilizes editing software that allows users to highlight text and attach notes without actually comprising the

integrity of books; it even includes a word search to find specific paragraphs to save time. In some cases, e-books are less expensive than their print counterparts as prices are decreasing (Greenfield, 2013). With the Internet becoming more readily available, the demand for e-books also rises. As an environmental bonus, as e-books become preferable over print, the demand for paper will decrease as well. More importantly, e-literature has and will introduce new reading skills.

The Internet has already inadvertently taught its users how to hyper read. Hyper reading is feared because of its potential to replace close reading. Katherine Hayles, on the other hand, in *How We Think* offers a possible alleviation to such worries: to utilize both hyper reading and close reading to attain a broader, quicker, but still full understanding of texts read (Hayles, 2012, p 69). She goes on to explain that a synergy between the two skills will advance the literary medium as a whole. Such skill to alternate and find the balance between the two is not only necessary for the survival of electronic literature, but also for readers to function in the future.

With the world becoming more fast paced, it does seem logical to develop skills that will match the speed of its progression; hyper reading is serendipitous in this aspect. However, it is not the speed that should be emulated, but rather the efficiency. While hyper reading does provide the speed factor, it does not provide the comprehension and connections between texts like close reading does. And while close reading provides comprehension and connections, it does not have the speed to match that of the digital explosion of information. A synergy between the two skills allows readers to not only keep up with the pace of information, as well as the explosion of literature in the future, but also understand the texts and draw themes and ideas from them (Hayles, 2012, 69). Such "rehearsal of information and associations (Mastin, 2010,

2)" will continue to develop this new skill and help introduce better reading strategies for the digital medium in the future.

Just as there were conflicts between medieval manuscripts and early modern print, so is there today a conflict between print and digital ("From Manuscript to Print", 2011). The past progression into print introduced new reading practices, skills, and structures, and today's digital progression will repeat this cycle as literature moves into the digital medium. Thwarting this development will only hurt the literary discipline as the old methods of the print era will become archaic in the rapid ever-changing world. Inconveniently, there are problems associated with the digital medium. Though, through the acceptance of literature into the digital medium, active change, interactions, constructive criticism, and improvements can be brought to the literary digital medium. As philosopher Marshall McLuhan states in *Understanding Media*, "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 7). Rather than judging the medium by its content, the focus should be on the potential and impact the medium will have on the literary world.

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