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Author

Boluk, Stephanie

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Seriality, the Literary and Database in *Homestar Runner*: Some Old Issues in New Media

Stephanie Boluk
University of Florida
4008 Turlington Hall
P.O. Box 117310, Gainesville, FL
32611-7318
+1 352.359.3060
sboluk@ufl.edu

ABSTRACT

At the intersection between concepts of the literary and emergent forms of database aesthetics lies a contemporary model for theorizing serial production. This paper investigates the under-examined concept of seriality and the way it has been reconfigured in digital media. Using *Homestar Runner* as the central case study, I provide a survey of these issues surrounding the literary, database and seriality and the way they figure in this Flash website. I will then trace the propensity of electronic literature for what has been described as a technologically-conditioned melancholia and relate this to the serial constructs within *Homestar Runner*.

Keywords

seriality, electronic literature, database, narratology, melancholy
Homestar Runner

1. INTRODUCTION

Inversely correlated to its popularity as a form, seriality as a narrative device has historically received little scholarly attention.¹ This may be due to its long-time association with popular forms of mass-produced media such as comics, soap operas and genre fiction that occupy a somewhat uncertain position with respect to concepts of the literary. With the development of digital literature, the logics of algorithms and database transform the storytelling potential of serial narratives. Recent anthological and archeological publications such as N. Katherine Hayles's *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008), accompanied by volume 1 of the *Electronic Literature Collection* as well as C.T. Funkhouser's *Prehistoric Digital Poetry* (2007) indicate not only a disciplinary drive to establish both a language and history for speaking about digital literature, but also the publication of such books is itself a product of a field which has itself already stabilized and is in search of both a history and a canon. This paper explores the place that serial works occupy within these disciplinary systems of classification.

¹ Jennifer Hayward's *Consuming Pleasures* (1997) traces the historical origins of biases against seriality rooting it in 19th century anxieties towards industrialism and an emerging working class readership.

My particular focus will be on the intersection of serial narratives with database aesthetics. An ongoing project like Mike and Matt Chapman's *Homestar Runner* (Fig. 1) may fall outside the range of what many digital media scholars might strictly regard as electronic literature. I propose, however, that this particular work serves as an interesting case study for raising questions regarding the horizon of the literary in the digital humanities, as well as for exploring how new media engages the practice of seriality with a renewed importance.



Fig 1. *Homestar Runner*'s main menu
(one of over twenty skins)

Homestar Runner's structure as a series of serial micronarratives embedded in a larger database, connects it to a discussion of what some critics have identified as a kind of technologically-conditioned melancholia in contemporary electronic literature. This melancholia can be seen as a response to the dehistoricizing impulse of media development, what Terry Harpold terms the "conceits of the upgrade path." As Harpold writes, "[b]ecause technical innovation in popular computing is driven more by the allure of expanding markets than by something so quaint as a sense of responsibility to historical continuity, commercial discourses of the upgrade path will inevitably promise consumers new and more satisfying interactions, and encourage them to see the older ones as outmoded or no longer relevant. The conceits of the upgrade path are tightly bound to ideologemes of the

marketplace and the fantasies of progress they induce” [6], p.4. The temporal movement of fragmented serial narratives within a database form in *Homestar Runner* creates a site where the melancholic response to loss manifests itself as both a resistance to the dehistoricizing impulse of a cultural and technical upgrade path as well as a submission to the power of *the new*.

2. SERIALITIES

Before turning to a discussion of electronic literature, it is worth noting some of the competing, yet interrelated uses of the term *seriality*. Database and narrative engage the concept of seriality in different ways depending on context. The term is generally used to mean objects that are arranged in some form of a series – this could be temporal, spatial or conceptual. In literature, the term frequently refers to stories or publications that are released in intervals over a period of time, constructed with a forced pause incorporated into the reception of the work.

Alternately, the form of seriality associated with Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman* generally refers to a more synchronic form of seriality. Dina Sherzer identifies serial patterns in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet and other French novelists “by means of a number of elements which are repeated syntagmatically with some variation” [16], p. 88. Although the texts are characterized by “non-linearity, discontinuity and fragmentation,” (p. 87) their organizing principle is based on repetition and difference such that “something always echoes something else” (p. 92). Many of these non-narrative, associational linking strategies anticipate the devices of contemporary hyperfiction.²

Seriality is also a concept used for theorizing subjecthood. Arising from philosophical and political science discourses respectively, both Jean-Paul Sartre³ and Benedict Anderson⁴ have employed the concept in their own way to model an individual’s relationship to serially aggregable group formations (Anderson’s seriality relates to issues of nationalism and identity whereas in Sartre, seriality is a condition of modernity describing individual disempowerment). Both Sartre and Anderson tie their discussion of the term to media and specifically print culture.

What binds these competing modes of seriality, emerging out of fine art, popular culture, political science and statistics appears to be a relationship to industrial society as modes of mass production, consumption and organization rely heavily on serial logics. Digital media and specifically, a database aesthetic, subsumes these multiple, perhaps even contradictory uses of seriality under its regime of production. The experimental, associative logic that characterized the serial work of the new novelists is combined with sequential storytelling to produce a

² This form of literary serialism in the *nouveau roman* also has an analogue within contemporary art. The rigorous systems of minimalists such as Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd embrace serial techniques through their spatial deployments of highly repetitious, schematic designs.

³ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 1* (New York: Verso, 1991), p. 253-342.

⁴ See Benedict Anderson, "Nationalism, Identity and the Logic of Seriality" in *Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*. (New York: Verso, 1998), p. 29-45

non-linear narrative style exemplified in the popular website *Homestar Runner*.

3. THE LITERARY IN ELECTRONIC LITERATURE

If the definition of literature has already been faced with numerous challenges within the realm of print, this definition is only further complicated by attaching “digital” or “electronic” to the term “literature.” One could relate this issue to the same problems that Walter Ong identified when he admonished earlier scholars for use of the term “oral literature,” describing it as a “preposterous term” that revealed “our inability to represent to our minds a heritage of verbally organized materials except as some variant of writing” [12], p. 11. The expression “electronic literature” must contend against the same printcentric biases that once infelicitously framed oral culture as a lesser subset of writing technologies.

The disciplinary structures surrounding critical inquiry in the humanities has led to the adoption of terms such as *digital poetry* and *electronic literature*. Such terminology engages the tension between print and digital forms of writing. In addition to the fact that electronic literature borrows heavily from the conventions of print culture (and vice-versa as the two now coexist and are mutually informed by one another), C.T. Funkhouser has suggested that because much early experimentation in computer literature, poetry and art took place offline in the pre-Internet era (1959-1995), the practices of electronic art were established prior to the Internet and the set of textual possibilities it facilitated [5], p. 195. Creative productions have still not exploited the networked potential of online media in a way fully embraces what Ted Nelson imagined with his “deeply intertwined” Xanadu. While one can see intertwined structures in non-literary Internet uses (wiki servers, forums, meme building, etc.), creative productions have not generally adopted this model. The scaffolding of authorship and accreditation that has arisen out of print-centric practices make it difficult to develop literary models that depart from the notion that both text and author are individual, self-contained units. Even formally experimental works of digital literature and art typically default to traditional modes of authorship.

In *Electronic Literature*, Hayles takes on the challenge of defining electronic literature, offering up the Electronic Literature Organization’s (ELO) tautological description that 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” [7], p. 3. Dissatisfied with this definition, Hayles proposes that electronic literature be thought of as “creative artworks that interrogate the histories, contexts, and productions of literature, including as well the verbal art of literature proper” (p. 4). In doing so, Hayles reformulates the field so that it is no longer defined in technicist terms, but on the basis of a kind of self-reflexivity, imagining electronic literature as those works which attend to their cultural and formal specificities.

On examining the history of electronic literature, an aspect that may be omitted from formal definitions of the literary, but appears to have had considerable influence on the formation of the field is the notion that electronic literature conveys a kind of seriousness. This is made patent in the marketing rhetoric for Eastgate Systems, an influential early publisher of hyperfiction, which brands itself as offering “serious hypertext.” Given the cultural

impact of Eastgate in producing what has come to be known as first-wave hyperfiction, one wonders if Hayles's use of the term "literary" might be informally exchangeable with Eastgate's "serious."

By framing electronic literature in this manner, it has come to be regarded as work done by a small core of artists exploring the potential of networked and programmable media, whose institutional setting is outside of both corporate and popular culture (notwithstanding the fact that most electronic artists frequently work to some degree within the confines of proprietary software).⁵

4. SERIALITY, THE LITERARY AND THE DATABASE

Digital media embraces serial structures as seen in blogs, webcomics, social networking sites, wiki servers, image forums, meme building and scoring systems in videogames, but the relationship between serialism and narrative continues to be relatively under-theorized. Marie-Laure Ryan's *Avatars of Story* (2006) is an extraordinary intervention in the field of narratology. Yet even her analysis, which updates older narratological models (e.g. Gérard Genette, Gerald Prince, Seymour Chatman, Mieke Bal) to interactive, multimodal narratives, largely focuses on stand-alone texts and ignores the specific conditions created by the relays between the multiple orders of temporality at work in a serial production. The use of temporal pauses in the distribution of a work can have significant effects on both the structure of a narrative as well as its reception. While temporality is a narratological category considered with respect to both diegetic time as well as actual reading length, the impact of serial reading practices has remained relatively unaddressed. This is despite the fact that, as Jennifer Hayward's audience-focused study of seriality has shown, these different conceptual models of a text fall across class lines and shape different consumption practices which in turn dramatically affects the way a work is interpreted [9], p. 37.⁶ The fact that serial works have historically been analyzed without attention to their serial design has further placed this narrative device outside the scope of the literary.

Adding to the discussion of seriality and the literary in new media is an intersecting issue of narrative's relationship to the database. As Ed Folsom has written, "What we used to call the canon wars were actually the first stirrings of the attack of database on narrative" [4], p. 1574. The relationship between database and narrative is a line of inquiry that was first raised by Lev Manovich

in an article for a special issue of *AI and Society* followed by its publication as a chapter in his seminal *Language of New Media* (2001). Exceeding the technical definition of database which he describes as a "structured collection of data" [12], p. 218, Manovich suggests that the database aesthetic is not only a new genre established by new media, but, following Erwin Panofsky, a symbolic form for our age. Reminiscent of ludology vs. narratology debates in game studies, Manovich antagonistically frames database against narrative with his now notorious claim that "database and narrative are natural enemies," (a provocative position he himself never actually fully embraces throughout the chapter) [12], p. 225.

Since Manovich announced this antagonism between database and narrative, numerous other critics have further engaged his framework.⁷ The development of database technology and the debates concerning database's relationship to narrative has some interesting implications for serial production. Serial narratives can be reconfigured in digital media since production is no longer bound to linear sequentiality or a single media mode.

On the one hand, database, as has been seen in the development of recording technologies, DVDs and online media, offer a greater sense of narrative accountability and greater opportunity to follow and keep track of an extended series. In this sense it is not that database aesthetics are inimical to narrative but it is precisely on account of databases that serial narratives have been allowed to flourish due to the increased storage and transmission capabilities made possible by digital technology. The more easily accessible a serial object, the greater push for continuous, intertwined plots and large ensemble casts of complex characters. This can be seen in the boom of narratively intricate television serials (e.g. *The Wire*, 24).

By contrast, databases also facilitate narrative fragmentation, as the principal mode of organization need not be structured according to narrative sequence. Textual structures that depart from linear modes of storytelling and destabilize temporality have been a common feature of electronic literature from the early Storyspace hyperfiction of Eastgate to more recent online creative writing experiments in hypermedia (e.g. Judd Morrissey's Flash work *The Jew's Daughter*).

5. HOMESTAR RUNNER

A new media object positioned at the center of these issues surrounding database, narrative and seriality is *Homestar Runner*, an ongoing webserial that exploits both the archival, encyclopedic potential of database as well as the ability to restructure narratives in non-linear forms. Developed in Adobe Flash *Homestar Runner*

⁵ Florian Cramer suggests that the fact that software has become proprietary, ironically, is as a result of early experimentations by avant-garde electronic artists who determined the corporate pathways that new media would follow [3], p. 273.

⁶ Hayward's highly revealing study of Dickens's 19th century readers demonstrates the difference between his working class audience, forced to wait for the cheaper serial installments that were often read aloud, and the wealthier classes (who were also often his critics and reviewers) who frequently waited for the costlier complete volumes. Read privately and without forced pauses, this mode of consumption produced a very different relationship to the work from that of Dickens's working class audience (See [9] Chapter 1, p. 21-83).

⁷ Victoria Vesna's edited collection *Database Aesthetics*, which includes a version of Manovich's essay "Database as Symbolic Form," gathers an impressive group of digital media critics and artists charting the role of database within the arts and humanities. In a special section of the *PMLA* on the place of databases in humanist inquiry, Ed Folsom, N. Katherine Hayles, Jerome McGann and Peter Stallybrass offer critiques and reformulations of Manovich's argument. Hayles here as well as in other works reiterates her disagreement with Manovich's adversarial rhetoric arguing instead that database and narrative should be viewed as "natural symbionts whose existence is inextricably entwined with that of its partner" [8], p. 1606.

is composed of a series of playable objects. These playable objects or narrative units that are episodically updated to the website fall under a wide range of categories, accessible through the variety of submenus in the website. The ergodic aspect of these objects has become progressively more important as the website develops. Navigating the graphical user interfaces (GUI) is an important aspect of the website's aesthetics. Moreover, the animated shorts contain Easter eggs encouraging the reader to actively mouse over the screen and there is a growing collection of video games embedded within the diegesis.

The characters of *Homestar Runner* were first developed in a children's book written by Mike Chapman and Craig Zobel. With his brother Matt Chapman, Mike Chapman would further develop the characters into the Flash animated universe of homestarrunner.com which officially went online in 2000. The characters of *Homestar Runner* are neither Disney cute nor *South Park* crude, although comparisons are frequently made to the similarly flat, limited animation of Matt Stone and Trey Parker. In a tradition of comics and animation, *Homestar Runner's* far more surreal characters are impossible to locate along any realistic age spectrum. They perform innocence and experience in various degrees, functioning as polysemic signifiers that embrace these contradictory positions – a hybrid condition made possible by their status as cartoons.

The titular Homestar Runner is the good-natured, yet dimwitted frontman. He is a slender, white creature with inexplicably invisible arms, no pants and a protruding ledge for a lower lip that may perhaps explain his speech impediment. Strong Bad is Homestar's antagonist and the most popular personality on the website because of the frequency with which one of the most active areas of the website, the Strong Bad emails, is updated. He is a rotund, gruff figure with a bare chest, bizarre accent, boxing gloves for hands and a Mexican wrestling mask for a face. Other main characters include Strong Bad's brothers Strong Sad and Strong Mad, Bubs, Coach Z, Pom Pom, the King of Town, the Poopsmith and, the one female, Marzipan (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Homestar Runner's main cast of characters

The culture of childhood is extremely important to *Homestar Runner*, both in terms of the personalities of the characters as well as the Chapman brothers' nostalgic relationship to the culture of childhood. Artistic production and childhood-like imagination are

conflated as the characters' creative play is the central premise through which new worlds and characters (or iterations of a core character) are established. Strong Bad for example, invents a dragon that becomes the villain of *Peasant's Quest*, a parody of the early adventure game *King's Quest* (1984). *Teen Girl Squad* (Fig 3.), initially developed as Strong Bad's response to a fan email, is a series of animated doodles against a lined notebook paper background. Minimalist and constrained in its aesthetic, *Teen Girl Squad*, Strong Bad's depiction of teenage girl stereotypes, represents a distilled form of seriality as the conclusion of each episode abruptly ends when Strong Bad, displaying his predilection for gore and violence, finds a random way to kill off each of the characters who return unscathed and ready to repeat the formula each new episode.



Fig. 3: Cartoons within cartoons: *Teen Girl Squad*

The characters function as vehicles for creative invention. They are regularly repurposed through the lens of various genres and media converting them into frame narratives (or alternately, one could argue a kind of database) for the proliferating narrative layers within the *Homestar Runner* storyworld. The characters become instruments for a diegetic *mise en abîme*. Taking the serial iterations of Strong Bad as an example, he exists in zombie, Atari and vector-graphics form. A Japanese anime version of alternate-ego named "Stinkoman" has been converted into a *Megaman*-style video game. A surrealist-inspired version of Strong Strong Bad sports a Casio VL-Tone keyboard for a head and there is a grainy black and white version of Strong Bad that recalls early 20th century film and radio serials. Strong Bad stars as a 70s-style action hero named Dangeresque in homemade films (and subsequently Wiiware video games). In the same way the characters make believe to imagine themselves in a range of scenarios that transcend the generalized suburban landscape in which they live, so too does the website function as a repository of media experiments and parodies. Flash and these surreal characters prove to be highly versatile tools for the website's capacious formal experimentation that is not completely afield of the Oulipo's constrained writing exercises.

What is created in one episode will then be further developed and expanded upon in later works, creating a serialized universe in which there is little causal narrative continuity, but there is an interlinking structure that requires the reader to build a mental framework for conceptualizing the world out of the various

episodes. In this respect, *Homestar Runner* employs devices that recall the serial constructs of the *nouveau roman*, while simultaneously operating within the tradition of serial periodicals, merging these two forms of seriality typically perceived as distinct from one another. *Homestar Runner* offers a narratological model that bridges sequential, animated storytelling with an ergodic, database logic that builds a world that can only function within networked and programmable media. Its formal uniformity at the level of the pixel makes for an enhanced form of repetition and standardization that recalls the process of file duplication. In *Homestarrunner.com* the logic of repetition is built into the website's architecture through the use of fixed character models and looping animated sequences common to Flash.

5.2 Metaleptic Relays

Marie-Laure Ryan, working from Gérard Genette's rhetorical definition of metalepsis, has described metalepsis as the folding of stacked narrative layers upon themselves. It is the "passage between levels that results in their interpenetration, or mutual contamination" [14], p. 207. *Homestar Runner* employs a versatile set of metaleptic devices, in which the stability between the various narrative orders is continually undermined through its use of intratextual relays and intertwined, polysequential structures. Multiple, self-reflexive GUIs embedded in the website create feedback loops between the various narrative and formal orders of the database.

The GUIs are not simply a portal to access 'real' content, but are also part of the aesthetic experience of this self-contained online world in which there is a fluid passage between these various textual layers.⁸ On the homepage, mousing over buttons will produce action and responses by the characters. There are currently over twenty skins for the main page, randomly generated when a user first accesses the page, which thematically relate to particular episodes housed within the website

The GUI can function as a character itself. At the end of early Strong Bad emails, for example, a drop down menu appears in the form of a sheet of perforated paper from a dot matrix printer that gives the user the option to repeat the email or return to the main page (Fig. 4). Strong Bad named this item "the paper" and it signals the closure of the email. The paper has a quirky personality and, in keeping with the ontology of computer printers, may or may not obey Strong Bad's commands to drop down. This drop-down menu metaleptically integrates narrative with navigation.

Similarly, the games menu that displays a selection of *Homestar Runner* games is not simply an archive, but behaves as a fixed screen, *Space Invaders*-style shooter game. To select a game the user shoots its icon, remediating the tropes and aesthetic of retrogaming into the menu.

⁸ The creators deliberately chose not to include external advertisements or pop-up ads that break the fourth wall of the *Homestar Universe*, instead opting for aesthetic consistency at the expense of revenue.



Fig. 4: The paper metaleptically serves as menu and character

While there are many website databases of serialized animation and webcomics, there are few that metaleptically integrate both the interface and multi-modal possibilities of Flash so thoroughly into their construction. Ryan has commented on how uses of Flash have, thus far, been generally limited:

It is difficult to predict where narrative is heading in the age of Flash. Most applications so far have been minigames, purely visual works, random combinations of sound, text, or picture fragments known as "remixes," "theoretical fictions" that privilege meta-textual comments at the expense of narration, concrete poetry, or visual adaptations of print poems. All we can say at the present time is that Flash narratives, because of the length restriction, will be neither the complex labyrinths of Storyspace nor the time-consuming quests of IF. [14], p. 158-9

Contrary to Ryan's speculation about art in the age of Flash, the Chapman brothers have created a world that is as complex and labyrinthine as any work of literary hyperfiction. Working within the constraints and conditions of possibility afforded by Flash, the website has built this vast world largely through the production of short, serial episodes in animated or videogame form. The website has become so extensive that an even larger database has been developed by fans as a reference guide for keeping track of the interlaced narratives.

5.3 Database + Narrative

As this database has expanded, it is appropriate that the fans have reacted by producing, in turn, another database in order to manage the material. The fan-created *Homestar Wiki* is an information database that exists on an independent server that functions as a kind of metatext overlaying the original website. There are over 2400 articles that analyze and comment on the website, collectively interpreting the jokes and references, writing a history of this universe as it develops. In narratological terms, the wiki has established the unstated elements of "story" or "fabula" which the curious user can access to gain a richer sense of how the characters and world functions. For example, a user could search the wiki in order to locate a chronological history of Teen Girl Squad or Trogdor the dragon to develop an understanding of how the episodes and objects within the episodes interrelate. As the

polylinear sequentiality of the website is much more complex to unpack than sequential narratives that unfold along an unbroken temporal line, the task of collectively interpreting *Homestar Runner*'s grand narrative has been taken up on the wiki.

A continued debate amongst narratologists has been the ontological status of "story." Is there an essential narrative kernel that can be taken out of its medial context? As Seymour Chatman writes, the "transposability of the story is the strongest reason for arguing that narratives are indeed structures independent of any medium" (20). Earlier narratologists such as Chatman tended to ignore the materiality of media by imagining narrative to have an almost transcendental quality. On the opposite end of the spectrum there exists what Ryan has called a "radical relativism" in which the "toolbox of narratology must be rebuilt from scratch for every new medium" (34). Ryan proposes a model of narrative that navigates the conflict between medium specific and medium-blind analysis by defining narrative as a "a cognitive construct or mental image, built by the interpreter in response to the text" [15] p. 8.

This scholarly debate is not incidental to the *Homestar Runner* fan wiki as it is deeply invested in the notion that there is a larger, coherent narrative suturing these seemingly fractured, non-sequential forms of discourse. By attempting to fill in the causal gaps and to distill the elements of story, this paratextual object is itself creating another fiction through its cataloguing and explicating of the various narrative objects within *Homestar Runner*. In order to write *Homestar Runner*'s narrative, the fans use a database model to produce another object that is essentially a result of the collective "mental image" generated from the website.

5.4 The Melancholic Database

Manovich's theory of database aesthetics is far more popular than his own aesthetic attempts at database cinema (what he has termed "soft cinema"). The concept of database cinema appears to have at this point remained largely confined to either museum and gallery video art or commercial marketing gimmicks. Although *Homestar Runner* does not identify itself under this term, it stands out as an example of a popular work that has successfully created a database narrative, chiasmically using both narrative as database and database as narrative. Rather than viewing database and narrative as "natural enemies," *Homestar Runner* comes closer to Hayles's vision of database and narrative as "natural symbionts" [8].

As Daniel Punday has noted, a product of this intersection appears to be a predisposition in database art towards the production of work that is distinctly melancholic in tone. He sees this substitution of sequential narrative with a lyrical melancholy as symptomatic of electronic literature. In addition to the broad range of Eastgate's "serious" hypertext, Manovich's own *Mission to Mars* (2005) stands out as an example of this phenomenon. Manovich employs a database aesthetic in order to represent the figure of an alien secret agent whose loss of identity (referencing the immigrant experience of cultural dislocation and perhaps Manovich's own emigration from the Soviet Union to the United States) reflects a cultural alienation within a datascape that is beyond sequential navigation and narration. The narrative fragmentation of the database conveys this condition of being lost in the space between differing cultures.

Punday argues that "[e]motional involvement is especially important for the interactive text because the user must be prompted to act and move through the text to a degree not required by more traditional reading" [13], p. 81. But why have so many electronic artists chosen to substitute narrative progress with an emotional involvement that is specifically in a minor key? Writing on his digital *The Impermanence Agent*, Noah Wardrip-Fruin has written "Whatever we may say about digital culture, it is always time for something to die."⁹

Working from Sigmund Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's work, Punday suggests that electronic literature's melancholy and loss of narrative progression is not only a convention, but also a structural condition of digital writing. Using Abraham and Torok's framework, Punday describes the process of mourning as one of introjection and melancholy as "incorporation," a refusal "to transform the ego's investments and to respond to a lost object" [13], p. 128. Noting that new media has a complex relationship with older aesthetic modes, Punday suggests that its remediating properties can be viewed as a form of melancholic incorporation. New media works are "more likely to adopt the mournful tone of working through the changes from one aesthetic medium to another" (p. 98).

From this psychoanalytic perspective, the database is converted into a kind of melancholy machine, creating an architecture which suspends and memorializes objects without properly attending the situation of their initial loss. Describing the database anxieties of a post 9/11 world, Norman M. Klein writes: "The noisy era of data storytelling has begun. And it aches" [17], p. 86.

Compared with hypertext fiction such as *Afternoon, a Story* (1987) or Rand and Robyn Miller's adventure game *Myst* (1993), *Homestar Runner* may be an unlikely candidate for kinship in this family of works as on the surface it is a bright, playful work. Yet its capacious absorption of media and pop culture makes use of an aesthetic strategy of database storytelling that is not immune to its own bouts of melancholia. The website's backward glance at older media and genres, however ironic, is still filled with a sense of longing not for these items as they were, but as they were imagined to be. While *Homestar Runner* lacks the specific mode of lyrical melancholia that Punday has identified in electronic literature, one could argue that the nostalgia in the website reflects a grieving for lost objects; specifically, a grieving for the cultural and technical imaginaries of the eighties and nineties (non-coincidentally coinciding with the artists' own childhoods). With

⁹ There is a long tradition of associating inscription devices with death. André Bazin famously described film as "change mummified" [1], p. 8. Walter Ong notes that "[o]ne of the most startling paradoxes inherent in writing is its close association with death" [8], p. 81. Offering up a genealogy that traces the history of this relationship beginning with "Plato's charge that writing is inhuman, thing-like, and that it destroys memory," he concludes that "[t]he paradox lies in the fact that the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its potential for being resurrected into limitless contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers" (p. 81). Both Ong and Bazin describing one of the central structuring relations of writing as a kind of operation of the living dead.

the characters themselves appearing as figures of arrested development, *Homestar Runner's* serves as a kind of reliquary of technologically and culturally obsolescent items. This reliquary is converted into a playground as these old media are remediated into Flash forms and revisioned so that they are not emulating original material but generating utopian and nostalgic parodies.

Terry Harpold has described the market-driven rhetoric of technological innovation and progress as the “conceits of the upgrade path.” As a result this lack of backwards compatibility and the constraints of proprietary software, many important works within the past fifty years have already been lost to history. Recent new media scholarship has stressed the importance of returning to older technologies and earlier generations before they are irrecoverably lost as their significance was never fully processed in their own era. As Harpold has written, “I do not yet think we understood them well the first time or that we have discharged our responsibility to them” [6], p. 2-3.

Although new media historians and scholars may be making gestures towards recuperating new media’s rapidly disappearing history, the current cultural climate remains under the spell of a dehistoricized upgrade path. A symptomatic response to this is perhaps what Punday has identified as the melancholic condition of electronic literature. It is not just that media have come and gone, but that they were never fully assimilated even while here.

Functioning as a serial nostalgia engine, *Homestar Runner* manifests its unease with the upgrade path of history by fetishizing janky, atavistic technologies and cultural ephemera from popular media. Yet the serial form in which the website operates simultaneously places it firmly within an upgrade logic, as the regular additions mean that the website is continually in a process of transformation as newer works in-flect and supersede the old. One way the creators have addressed this tension is through Strong Bad’s semi-regular upgrades of his computer hardware with slightly newer, but still antiquated technology. Initially, Strong Bad writes his emails on a computer named the Tandy 400 (which appears to resemble the Apple II and takes its name after RadioShack’s Tandy series) and a dot matrix printer. Initially, Strong Bad accesses his email via a command line interface and progressively “upgrades” his computer to more recent, yet still obsolescent computers (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Strong Bad periodically upgrades his computer

These replacements, in keeping with Strong Bad’s adolescent

male personality, are typically the result of some plot device which results in the old computer violently exploding beyond repair – this physical obliteration representing the process of cultural obliteration that occurs as new computers replace their earlier models. Notably, although Strong Bad discards his old computers with impunity, the broken technologies occasionally return from their garbage heap graves to haunt Strong Bad, refusing to willingly submit to the upgrade path and be erased from his memory (Fig. 6). These apparitions behave as a technological return of the repressed.

While *Homestar Runner* is by no means the only web serial, it brings together interrelated issues of the literary and the database and demonstrates a way in which multi-modal storytelling and

Flash animation are being used to create a rich, hypermediated experience. Being a work both of popular culture and about popular culture, it circulates within a different context from that of the “serious” electronic literature such as that offered by Eastgate or Manovich’s soft cinema. Yet, an analysis of its experimental form and narrative devices reveals an underlying aesthetic of melancholy that ties it to what might perhaps be regarded as more traditional forms of electronic literature.

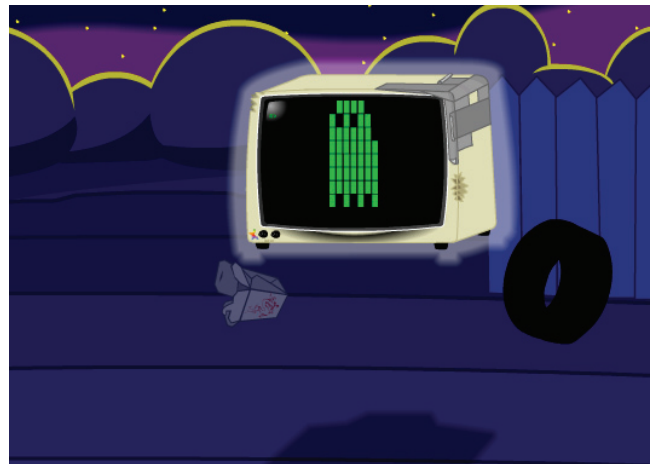


Fig. 6 The Tandy 400 returns from the grave.

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