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Assignment Three: Part II

Reading Michael Joyce's *Twelve Blue*, Judd Morrisey's *The Jew's Daughter*, and Maria Mencia's *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs* together comprise my first experience interacting with electronic literature. While I've read theorists who focus on materiality and hypertext (Hayles, O'Gorman, Bolter, Faigley) and those who focus on the shift of thought in relation to changes in communication methods (Ong, McLuhan), never before had I actually engaged literature designed for and by digital media technologies.

I've learned that our theorists are right: media specific analysis (Hayles) requires us to acknowledge that the medium is the message (McLuhan). Reading electronic literature is not like the experience of reading print text. I've come to believe that the frustrations I experienced with the electronic literature and the ease with which I can enjoy print literature have very little to do with the value of the mediums themselves; instead, I find print easy to read because I'm accustomed to it, and because print has had thousands of years to inform and be informed by human reading habits and preferences. Likewise, I find electronic literature more difficult to read precisely because I'm not accustomed to it, and because it take time for "humans [to] engineer computers and computers [to] reeingineer humans in systems bound together by recursive feedback and feedforward loops" (Hayles 48). As those feedback and feedforward loops inherent in the reading of electronic literature continue to circulate information both ways, the medium itself will grow friendlier, and we as readers will become more amendable to it.

Since I read Hayles' account of *Twelve Blue* in *Electronic Literature*, I knew what to expect in terms of the complexity of the story line and the challenges I might face. Since "playing is one of the central metaphors," I expected to have to toy with the text and manipulate it like a game (Hayles 63). But upon opening the file, I realized immediately that reading literature electronically would be an adjustment. Most of the reading I do on-screen is of websites, and I'm accustomed to skimming and allowing my eye to quickly dart across the page. I rarely read word by word or across long lines of text. *Twelve Blue*, with its serif font and electric blue type against a navy background, was challenging for my eyes. The wide screen size meant following lines of text much longer than usual, either in print or online. Minimizing the window helped.

I began *Twelve Blue* by clicking "begin" on the left hand menu. The proceeding page offered only one hypertext link, so I followed that link. I found it strange to read an entire page of text, skipping over the link and then coming back to it rather than reading up to the link, clicking it, and coming back to the main text like I normally would when reading online. I enjoyed Joyce's references to September and Thanksgiving; because these references connect to the weather, the smell of cinnamon permeating my house, and the general attitude of fall, I was able to involve my sense of smell and my memory as I read the electronic text. It did take quite a while to get a sense of the interwoven stories in *Twelve Blue*, and I began to map characters' relationships to one another in my notes. By the time I had established a character list, I noticed the story began repeating itself. I figured that perhaps I had clicked through all the possible nodes. I used the threads on the left hand side to click through each scene again, and I couldn't find any unread portions. Still, I wasn't sure I had reached an end. Like Walker, I asked "how can we resolve the ambiguities of hypertext, where all the nodes are present, and none have been read once and for all and finished with?" (Walker). Hayles identifies this discomfort as Joyce's conscious decision to not "help us make sense of the world by establishing a correlation between the finitude of human life and the progression through a beginning, mjddle, and end characteristic of many print narratives" (69).

Reading Judd Morrisey's *The Jews Daughter* was an entirely different experience. Upon first glance, its aesthetics were more pleasing; the electronic page closely resembled print with standard column widths amenable for reading, and dark black text against a white background. But what seemed easy on the eye quickly shifted into a mess of moving, tricky, shifty text. I never did figure out whether, after moving my cursor over a linked word, I needed to start back at the top of the page or read only that text which had

shifted (which was always difficult to pinpoint). If the idea was to read each page from top to bottom again, the repetition tried my patience. After 608 screens of text, I'm still unclear on the details of the story or the cast of characters.

Perhaps, though, my frustration with *The Jews Daughter* was tainted by my material conditions while reading it. Out of town to visit my sister, I read *The Jews Daughter* in her makeshift office. While I would normally take a novel to lounge on a couch or in a comfy chair, I was constrained by Rachel's desktop computer and a hard wooden chair. The length of *The Jews Daughter* meant sitting in that uncomfortable position for an extended period of time, reading and re-reading the same text repeatedly. No wonder I couldn't savor the experience.

Reading Maria Mencia's *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs*, however, was—I dare say—fun. When a story is narrated via electronic literature, our expectations of stories in print come against the specificities of digital media. When electronic literature employs entirely different story-telling methods as in Mencia's work, however, that tension dissolves and readers can experience the dynamism of electronic media without the looming presence of the print tradition.

I chose to read *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs* in a linear way, clicking on each bird in order from one to 13. I delighted in Mencia's choice of visual representations for each bird (light/dark, translucent/opaque, more or less flighty/static) in comparison with each bird's sound and its related phonemes. The differences between each bird seemed carefully drawn and eloquently portrayed. After listening to each bird individually, I began toying with combinations (I followed the following order: 11+5+3+1+8+13-11+12+6-5-3+2+10). I noticed that the birds' sounds alternated, rather than competing against each other. Together, they made a beautiful cacophony, unpredictable and ever-changing. For me, Mencia's work represents that which cannot be represented in print, that which takes advantage of the specificities of the electronic literature genre and escapes the ever-present competition with revenants of print.

After reading Joyce's *Twelve Blue,* Morrisey's *The Jew's Daughter,* and Mencia's *Brids Singing Other Birds' Songs*, the media specific analysis proposed by N. Katherine Hayles in *Writing Machines* seems infinitely more necessary; reading electronic literature through a lens of print preferences would mean diminishing the specificities of the electronic medium. While the tensions between print and electronic literature can be experienced in *Twelve Blue* and *The Jew's Daughter*, Mencia's work epitomizes the unique capabilities of the electronic literature genre, which allows for entirely new expression of thought than cannot be replicated in print.

Works Cited

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