



Open Library of Humanities

Book Review: *Towards a Digital Poetics: Electronic Literature and Literary Games* by James O'Sullivan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). ISBN 978-3-030-11310-0 pp. 146 + xvii, £47.99 (ebook)

Nicola Presley, Bath Spa University, UK n.presley@bathspa.ac.uk



James O'Sullivan's *Towards a Digital Poetics: Electronic Literature and Literary Games* is a welcome addition to scholarship on electronic literature. Despite the theoretical approach, at no point does the book feel overwhelmingly abstract or bogged down in discussion. The book's structure is helpful, with six short chapters, further divided into sections. This is not an introduction to electronic literature, but is instead, as O'Sullivan writes: 'a reflection on a form that is increasingly prevalent in the artistic world, a form that operates at the juncture between the literary, the ludic, and the sensory' (xv). In the Introduction, O'Sullivan draws attention to the problem of definition, and particularly of naming, in digital literary studies. The book's subtitle draws attention to this issue as he uses the two terms consistently throughout – electronic literature and literary games – to refer to different examples of digital texts. He justifies this decision to differentiate between the two by emphasising the importance of reader/user perception of form and uses the term 'literary game' for those examples of literature that 'privilege play' (xvi).

O'Sullivan sets up Chapter One, 'Digital Culture and the New Modernity' with a consideration of T S Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*. He argues that rather than seeing electronic literature as 'new', we must read it alongside its precursors and current contexts. O'Sullivan usefully considers what we actually mean when we talk about digital culture and rightly problematises it as a 'catch-all for anything to do with computers, screen and the Web' (6). In Chapter One he discusses questions of mass culture, both historically and contemporaneously to position digital culture in similar debates of cultural forms, power, participation and audiences. Pleasingly, he also acknowledges that digital access is not equal, and further, the problem of obsolescence means that many early works are now lost.

The loss of these early examples of electronic literature is one of several challenges for critics attempting to define the genre. In Chapter Two, 'Electronic Literature', O'Sullivan sets out some of the critical debates surrounding such definitions, and raises a pertinent question: 'How can we be expected to define electronic literature, when we cannot define literature?' (25–6). By reading examples from what he calls the 'exemplars of their generation' – *afternoon, a story* (Joyce 1990), *Vniverse* (Strickland and Lawson 2002), and *All the Delicate Duplicates* (Breeze and Campbell 2017) – O'Sullivan plots a course through electronic literature into 'three distinct phases: first-generation hypertextual writing, visual electronic literature, and multimodal literary gaming' (28). He also notes the way in which the critical language of digital literary studies has changed in the same period, driven by technological advancements. Importantly, O'Sullivan argues that critics should 'refrain from basing our construction of e-lit on the exclusion of one thing, on saying *what is not* rather than *what is*' (38).

In Chapter Three, ‘Authorship and Reading in the Digital Age’, O’Sullivan discusses the shift from authors to author-producers and emphasises that electronic literature often depends on collaboration. Readers, in turn, must have a different relationship with digital texts: ‘they must still read, they must still observe, but they must also traverse, navigate, and choose’ (67). O’Sullivan notes that electronic literature is ‘academy-centred’ (71), in that much of the work is financially supported by institutions, rather than being market-driven. Some forms of electronic literature are certainly difficult to sell; indeed, the early 2010s saw the release of a number of enhanced book apps – generally adapted from print texts – from various ‘big’ publishers, but these have now all but disappeared. However, electronic literature in the form of literary games has been financially successful as ‘people buy games far more readily than they do electronic literature’ (71).

In the following chapter, ‘Interactivity and the Illusion of Choice’, O’Sullivan presents a sustained reading of The Chinese Room’s game, *Dear Esther*, which was released in 2012 and subsequently published on a number of platforms. O’Sullivan discusses the game in relation to his fascinating idea of the ‘digital sublime’. Digital worlds, such as gamespaces, seem infinite although the player knows they are not: ‘readers [...] are nonetheless attracted by the promise of exploration, the allure of freedom and liberation’ (83). *Dear Esther* is sublime because the game seems to offer unlimited access to another world, although as O’Sullivan points out, the player does follow a broadly linear path, and cannot stray beyond the limits of the gamespace. This is all related to the illusion of choice in electronic literature; even when users can select a particular path, this path still has to be constructed as a possibility by the author. In other words, ‘[t]he reader can be an active participant in the digital reading experience, but the transaction is still dictated by the author’ (90).

Chapter Five, ‘Digital Materiality and the Politics of the Screen’, includes some of the most detailed close reading of the whole book. O’Sullivan examines some of the most well-known examples of electronic literature, and also some that are far less familiar. In the section on ‘Politics of the Screen’, O’Sullivan discusses Juliet Davis’ ‘Pieces of Herself’ (2011) and Mark C. Marino’s *a show of hands* (2008) and crucially, elucidates how these two examples are related to their precursor texts – Shirley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995) in the case of ‘Pieces of Herself’ and *afternoon, a story* for Marino’s text. O’Sullivan emphasises the importance of materiality in this chapter, which applies to both digital and print texts. However, O’Sullivan suggests that ‘[t]he book as a physical artefact only offers an occasional insight into its content—the same

cannot be said of electronic literature, where the words and their mode of encapsulation share an inseparable symbiosis (100).

O'Sullivan concludes in his final chapter, 'Towards a Digital Poetics', that 'electronic literature is literature, only different from those other literatures which have come before and most likely different from other literatures that are yet to emerge' (118). In this provocative conclusion, he suggests that critics will 'only ever be working *towards* a digital poetics, because there is no one digital' (126). O'Sullivan's book is a timely intervention in the study of electronic literature and his engaging style, and cogent arguments, will stimulate further worthwhile discussions.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

