"Approaching Cyberspace"
Research and Undergraduate Studies in ICT and the Humanities at Blekinge Institute of Technology: A Doctoral Student's Perspective

Maria Engberg

I would like to briefly present the recent Graduate Summer School at Blekinge Institute of Technology, run under the heading "Approaching Cyberspace: Humanists as Actors in the Development of Technology." This heading indicates what kinds of issues we are concerned with in our research as well as our undergraduate education at the Humanities Section at Blekinge Institute of Technology (most notably within the program for Literature, Culture, and Digital Media starting this fall).

In our one-week summer school, lecturers such as Johanna Drucker, Michael Joyce, Carolyn Guyer, Jerome McGann, Alison McMahan, and Jane Prophet presented a wide range of topics from the spectrum of ICT and the Humanities. They also provided the participants with their unique dual perspectives since they represented not only the consumer/reader/theorist point of view, but also the view of the creator or participant. (The use of multiple labels to describe what we are when we read and write in the digital medium, makes evident that there are issues to think about.) Furthermore, the summer school offered hands-on workshops tutored by a team from Georgia Institute of Technology (Jay Bolter, Ron Broglio, Lissa Holloway-Attaway, and Lisa McNair). The workshops included tutorials in e.g. Dreamweaver and a MOO space.

In a two-day workshop on (digital) hypertext literature, Michael Joyce and Carolyn Guyer sought to introduce a series of questions they themselves have been engaged in for a number of years. They include

issues of how the materiality of texts is intricately interwoven with questions of acquisition, transformation, and transmittance of knowledge. In the first half of the workshop we were asked to create a hypertext piece using a set of pre-selected photographs (we could choose between four groups of photos: "Dream," "Rooftop," "Shoes," and "Tropical"). We were then asked to write short pieces of text to go with the images (but not necessarily link text to image in a logical or clear manner) and finally put it all together in some fashion, thinking about how and why we linked certain elements together. The software used was Microsoft PowerPoint. The objective was to present and discuss our works in the second part of the workshop.

It was fascinating to see what the different groups had done, and equally fascinating to discover how similar the pieces were. Most of us had a literary background, most of us an interest in narrative or poetic texts, and thus we (generally) attributed more importance to the words, and the possible connections the text could have with the images than to the images themselves. We spent some time discussing how one could use links within the hypertext, and what different types of links one could discern. Joyce suggested provisional categories such as e.g. the literal relation, the ironic relation, the thematic relation, and the un-integrated relation. He also spoke about "relationships of coherence" and "relationships of sequence and imminence." The different groups of relationships reveal the complexity and richness of the hyperlink (in digital and print texts), but it also makes it clear that the recent move towards dynamic media and multimedia formidably explodes the possibilities of theoretic (the set of relationships) as well as material linking (the "thing" of the link in the work). The move from text-dominated works towards multimedia or interartistic works is indeed becoming apparent, as Joyce himself suggested during the summer school. Analogously, there is also a noticeable shift in attention from hypertext fiction towards other forms of digital literature and art, a shift indicated by, among others, N. Katherine Hayles' *Writing Machines*. There are noticeable differences as regards theoretical issues

between the generally text-based hypertext literature and the emerging interartistic works. In the forefront of these is the question of kinesis. Movement is what changes everything – or at least has the potentiality to do so. Kinetic typography is added to the "standard" typography, images, and auditory elements.

The interartistic aspect of the poetic works that we created in our two-day workshop and the works of for example Talan Memmott, Shelley Jackson, Jim Rosenberg, Stephanie Strickland, Marjorie Luesebrink, Diana Slattery, and others, begs the questions of the creative tension that arises between software, hardware, images, and text. Although a similar tension can certainly be found in print, or paper works, a discernable difference can be noticed if we add sound and movement to the above-mentioned elements. As it is today, digital technology provides the tools by which all of these elements can be fused into one work.

As for instance Lev Manovich has argued, digital literary and artistic works might be more akin to film than to their analogue counterparts. This was certainly something that came to mind when some works were shown in the workshop in Karlskrona. A couple of participants with knowledge in Flash MX created a time-based piece which included moving elements. The piece made use of the technology that was available in the particular application used, but also of the skills of the particular users, which is an important distinction to make. This brings into focus another point of discussion, namely our own position as academics and educators in the humanities.

In the past, writing and reading skills were needed for the prospective writer/poet. Today, with digital technology as our working tool/s, we need new skills. Knowing a computer language – code – does not rank very highly within the humanities today. Perhaps this will or should change, not only for artistic but for pedagogical and, even, political reasons. As many have noted, there is hardly any room anymore for the academic or student who brags about his/her lack of computer skills.

The question is what happens to our education when we are faced with the challenges and opportunities of digital technology. Should

we, the humanists traditionally well versed in languages, add artificial languages such as Visual Basic, html code, or Javascript to our repertoire of skills? Is it not time to reconsider the disciplinary lines that continue to keep digital technology skills well outside the humanities education? The experiences that we had during the summer school in Karlskrona would suggest that it is high time to not only reconsider these boundaries but cross – or even scrap – them altogether.

And with the above suggestion I "return to the future." At Blekinge Institute of Technology we are developing our research group within the loosely defined field of ICT and the Humanities in which studies of (and work in) e.g. digital multimedia poetry (my own project), gender roles in computer games and on the Internet, theoretical approaches to digital media, text preservation and mark-up of texts, and digital literatures find room. We are also launching an undergraduate program that will inform and be informed by the research that we are doing at the Institute, thus creating a vibrant and intellectually diverse environment of studies of literature, language, culture, and technology.

Maria Engberg is a Ph.D. student at Blekinge Institute of Technology (BIT) and Uppsala University (The English Department). Her research focuses on the aesthetics of digital multimedia poetry, and deals with digitally created and published poetry that partially resides within avant-garde traditions of art and poetry tracing back to the late 19th century. She is also involved in the undergraduate education at BIT and was part of the development of the coming program "Literature, Culture, and Digital Media," which is an interdisciplinary program offered by the Humanities section in co-operation with the Media Technologies section at BIT and the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture at Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA.
E-mail: maria.engberg@bth.se

References

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