Lit Mods

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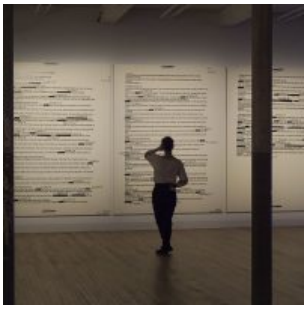


Included in the Gathering: Electronic Literature [Frame]works for the Creative Digital Humanities

Seiça describes modification as an art practice meant to subvert and divert from what we—as readers, spectators, and also consumers—expect from technological apparati and platforms. He extends the study of mods to "lit mods"—including art, games, and literature.

In particular, Seiça notes that the learning curve for modding has changed: where in the past, it may have taken a certain amount of user knowledge, modification may now be automated (for instance, through Instagram filters). More importantly, he asks what lit mods show us about literary practice and literary criticism. Where fast-moving content—fast-moving e-literature and e-poetry included—may defy interpretation, so analysis is strengthened by breaking down their mechanisms.

> ***A lesson in sabotage***
> *Modifying a machine*
>
> *Alter the machine so that it won't work without you*
> *So far improve it that you alone are good enough for it*
> *Give it a secret fault that you alone can repair*
> *Yes, alter it so that any other man will destroy it*
> *If he works it without you*
> *That's what we call: modifying a machine.*
>
> *Modify your machine, saboteur!*
>
> —Brecht, *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht* (435)

Introduction

This essay traces different genealogies of "modification" and "modding" in art, games, and literature in pre-digital and digital contexts. Though it departs from "art mods" to focus on what I call *lit mods*, or literary modifications, it seeks to highlight how cross-disciplinary creative practices of interventional modding are often characterized by a critical, ludic, and subversive ethos. It then investigates how these creative and critical practices can inform literary criticism. Lit mods hold the potential to act as hermeneutic methods for studying process and output, but also the content, form, and interface of

works of digital literature that are multimodal, such as kinetic poems. Precisely because poems that move at a very fast pace defy interpretation, methods that unfold from the practice of studying the mechanisms of digital processes can benefit their analysis. Modding employs exploratory strategies that seek to understand, among others, the very time-based nature of these works. Such methods are not unique to the criticism of digital literature. They can also be adapted to disciplines that deal with materially complex artifacts like the digital humanities.

Modification and Modding

"Modify your machine, saboteur!" incites Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's proposal of sabotage, written during 1931-33, as the Nazis entered the German Reichstag in fervor, constitutes itself as a critique of the dehumanization brought by the factory assembly line and the exploitation of the worker by a capitalist system represented by the factory machine. The poet's warning—as valid within that period as within the contemporary fervor to move into large-scale unprecedented automation—is a call for human action to deprive the machine of its full autonomy. If the poem hints at the dangers of such autonomy, it also proposes modification and "secret fault" (an "Easter egg" or, rather, an exploit) as a core way of protesting by creating human-machine dependencies that go against the machine's potential of destruction and oppression. Brecht gives a clear definition of modification as sabotage, while stressing modification's fundamental trait: someone "works it without you."

Modification is one of the fundamental exploratory traits of human action, adaption and creativity. Think about how human beings transform existing territory and landscape, modify their own bodies, genetically modify organisms, adapt objects and tools according to new needs, or repurpose games and artworks depending on their subjectivity. In computational systems, the urge to act upon existing material and modify it is no different. In fact, modifications have flourished due to the current politico-computational regimes and qualities of data, media, networks and systems: reproducibility, modifiability, re-programmability, hackability, propagability, and ubiquity.

Think about simple modifications of content and media, whose goals are functional, recreational or creative. The bottom line is that it is now much easier to add filters and modify content in photo applications, as they are diffused via social network sites, copy and paste material, access and customize content databases and repositories, reuse and modify text, image, sound and code—in sum, by remixing new and old, users insert new features in appropriated material. This is also true for hardware, when experimenting with electronics and circuit bending, but it is more pervasive with software.

While "mods"—modifications—and "modding"—usually meant as the act of modifying computer games—can be performed and investigated from different angles, this essay considers a broader perspective that takes into account modifying practices in art, games, and literature. Seen from an interventional point of view, these practices often seek to subvert and criticize, through irony and parody, established norms or political issues,

while celebrating art and collaboration with playfulness. Mods also hold the potential of offering concrete examples of how criticism can take insights from artistic perspectives, in order to study creative works with the very same processes that originate them.

Physical, virtual, analog, and digital modification and modding tends to belong to a DIY and communitarian (DIWO) approach and ethos. Modding can be hobbyist and ludic. It can derive from an exploratory goal of opening, disassembling and understanding hardware and software. It can be associated with a critical and ironic engagement with media. It can be activist. It can transgress and subvert the conventional uses of artistic objects and technological apparatus and platforms, in order to raise awareness, resist, protest or revamp, but also to playfully encounter and reimagine the world, games, art, and literature. Modding thrives in subcultures, such as tinkering and hobbyist communities, pirate radio, early personal computers, gaming and early net culture, the demoscene, but also in gatherings of enthusiasts such as case modding contests. In fact, you can modify objects, machines, or systems with very different purposes.

There are indeed rather more complex contexts. Modified media has always served multiple agents and agendas, with positive and negative outcomes. In recent times, think of the unethical manipulation of content in targeted disinformation and propaganda campaigns engendered by companies like Cambridge Analytica in the 2016 United States presidential elections and the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum. Or think of the "deep fake" manipulation of first-person videos for purposes such as propaganda and revenge porn.

Intervention in Artistic Modification

To address this social order of things, counter-acts are necessary. One of the ways counter-acting can happen is via artistic critiques, such as Daniel C. Howe and Bill Posters' *Big Dada*.

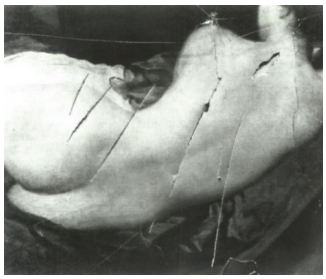
'Data is...' (2019) from Bill Posters on Vimeo.

Media Format 1. Daniel C. Howe and Bill Posters, "Data is...," *Big Dada*, 2019. Embedded video from http://vimeo.com/341904916

Part of *Spectre*, *Big Dada* uses proprietary machine learning to create fake videos that mesh the audio and video of found footage almost to perfection. Howe and Posters' seven modified videos include dead artist Marcel Duchamp's take on data as the "ultimate readymade" (Media Format 1), or Facebook's apologetic Mark Zuckerberg, one of the data-greedy questers for monopoly that knows that maximal control of data generates money, no matter the consequences. [1] Conceived as a "digital intervention" on Instagram during June 2019, *Big Dada* was later selected for the exhibition "Art Strikes Back: From Jorn to Banksy," curated by Christian Madsen at the Museum Jorn in Denmark, whose goal was to spark debate around interventional art in the lineage of Asger Jorn (Media Format 4.1-4.2). [2] The group exhibition's

> pivotal point is the artistic strategy of the "détournement," which means distortion or [misrepresentation]. Asger Jorn called his detour events "modifications." He saw it as a way in which he could modernize paintings by other artists by painting the pictures. In this way, the old gained new relevance. In detouring, iconic symbols are usually used together with satire, parody and humor to criticize e.g. art market, but often it also deals with current political and ethical issues. (Madsen, "Art Strikes Back: From Jorn to Banksy," machine trans. Posters 2019)

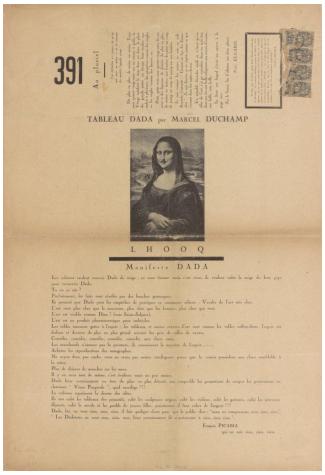
Recovering the Situationists' own definitions, Karen Kurczynski (296n17) opts for a more complex translation of *détournement* as "subversion" and "diversion." Thus, *Big Dada* is relevant because in this context it tactically criticizes and subverts the latest installment of pervasive methods of modification in a moment when they achieve a level of computer-generated similitude, between original and fake, that is almost undiscernible for the human eye. Howe and Posters address this situation because it clearly poses questions of ethics and politics, given that media is used to manipulate audiences and serve propagandistic aims. At the same time, their series rescues one of the early figures of interventional art modification, Duchamp, as a Dada-infused gesture of societal and political critique with a ludic tone—in this case, to critique the entanglement of corporate and state capitalism in its unrelenting metadata surveillance and extraction. *Big Dada* achieves this critique with a sharp touch of irony and satire, by exposing these power structures with the very same methods it criticizes.



Media Format 2. Mary Richardson, 1914. Photo detail published in *The Times* showing the slashes on Diego Vélazquez's *Rokeby Venus*. Source: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Richardson

Modifications in art have a long and ideologically-diverse trajectory often tied to subversive acts and critiques of prestigious and less prestigious artworks, but also direct political protest and vandalism, which are different in scope and ethical approach, but nevertheless have common traits. In 1914, Mary Richardson, who at the time was a London-based suffragist and a member of the Women's Social and Political Union, defied the art institution by vandalizing a very well-known painting in a politically-motivated protest. She entered the National Gallery and, with an axe, first attacked the glass and then the canvas of Diego Vélazquez's *Rokeby Venus* (Media Format 2). Richardson

slashed the depiction of the female nude several times as a protest against the arrest of WSPU's founder Emmeline Pankhurst, and "the cruelty and hypocrisy of the Government's treatment" (Nead 34-35). Cutting the canvas like Lucio Fontana would do more than forty years later—though in a rather conceptual and abstract way—Richardson's iconoclastic gesture gained visibility and achieved its aim. It "has come to symbolize a particular perception of feminist attitudes towards the female nude" (Nead 35) and of radical protest against the male gaze.



Media Format 3. Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q*, 1919. Copied by Francis Picabia, "who forgot to include the goatee" (Shipe 2020), and printed in the Dada journal *391*, no. 12, 1920. Source: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L.H.O.O.Q.

Five years later, Duchamp penciled a mustache and goatee on a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Gioconda*, and named the piece with initials to be read with French accent, as *L.H.O.O.Q* (Media Format 3). This act was part of a larger impetus to appropriate and reframe objects to which Duchamp called "readymades." Here, though, the notion of art modification is tied to the appropriation of existing artwork, which also encompasses variation. When in 1913 Apollinaire claimed being a pioneer of the futurist movement, he stressed that the name "futurism" was meaningless. Instead, it should be called "art varié" (qtd. in Marques 222n1). However, variation as art and play, as Ana Hatherly so aptly explored in praxis and theory, finds its immediate roots in the Mannerist and Baroque period. Variation as versioning is later explored in pre-digital context, for instance, in Wlademir Dias-Pino's process-oriented artworks and Concrete poems. Dias-Pino, the founder of the Poema/Processo movement, did not see his works as finalized but rather instances in the creation process.

As mass media progressively disseminated low-quality images and serialized art reproductions, artists like Francis Picabia, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Enrico Baj (Media Format 4.1), Daniel Spoerri and Asger Jorn appropriated reproductions, but also original

paintings and modified them.

Media Format 4.1. Exhibition view with Banksy's work in the foreground and Enrico Baj's work in the background, "Art Strikes Back: From Jorn to Banksy," Sep. 15 – Dec. 8, 2019, curated by Christian Madsen at the Museum Jorn in Denmark. Courtesy by Museum Jorn. Photo: Engedalfotografi.dk

Media Format 4.2. Asger Jorn, *Den Foruroligende Ælling* aka *Le Canard Inquiétant*, part of the *Modifications* exhibition at Galerie Rive Gauche, Paris, 1959. Oil on found canvas, 53 x 64.5 cm. Courtesy by Press Photo Museum Jorn.

From the 1940s onwards, Jorn created several series of modifications, beginning by intervening in reproductions of paintings and later by painting directly on top of canvasses found in flea markets. These would result in the exhibition *Modifications* in 1959, in whose catalogue the artist advocated for a "peinture détournée" (Media Format 4.2). For Jorn, a member of CoBrA and the Situationist International, modifications meant an act of provocation, a *détournement* of the visual language and symbols of the bourgeois painting. Jorn pursued a Situationist critique of the avant-garde's exhaustion and its institutional co-optation or "recuperation." Yet as Kurczynski (293) points out, he went further by exploring "kitsch [as] a form of folk creativity unfairly marginalized from the discourses of both modernism and the avant-garde." Within an art context of

alteration and intervention, Jorn's legacy is then vital, even more so because it "celebrate[s] anonymous creativity, amateur methods, and artistic collaboration across time" (Kurczynski 313), which definitely resonate in later types of modification. As we will now see, the bridge between art modification and computational art game modding is linked by transgressive and critical action with a strong ludic aspect.

Mods

"Modification," in the computational sense, acquired popularity via gaming culture with the abbreviated term "mod." "Fan mods" describe game modifications like patches, cheats or conversions developed by players in order to tinker with rules, characters, textures or levels. "Art mods" characterize game mods whose settings are modified for artistic and often critical purposes. For Axel Stockburger (29), at the interplay between art and games, modification occurs when "the artist is changing a functional or aesthetic element in an existing game. This [is] often [a] critical or ironic intervention." In this sense, art mods share affiliations with Jorn's work. Even if unacknowledged, they share the impetus to aesthetic and ludic modification, subversion and critical intervention. Consider then critiques of gender-biased and male-view dominated first-person shooter (FPS) games such as Loren Petrich's *Tina-Bob* (1996), a partial conversion or "patch" of *Marathon Infinity* "[that] replaced the protagonist 'Infinity Bob' with a female Tina" (Schleiner 1998: n.p.; 2001).

As Anne-Marie Schleiner (1998: n.p.) further stresses, instead of requiring a full game engine development, the "parasitic game patch is also a means to infiltrate gaming culture and to contribute to the formation of new configurations of game characters, game space and gameplay." Schleiner sees the creation of plug-ins and patches, that is, altered snippets of code, as acts of intervention and activism in the context of "hacker art" that seek to contest normative and violent game worlds represented in many FPS and AAA games. Artists have then sought to subvert or reinvent the goals and rules of mainstream games, a strategy that, as Jon Cates (160) argues, is fundamentally critical and political**:** "Depictions of increasingly 'realistic' violence in these games have been and remain a politicized issue of the first-person shooter. Artists who engage in this ongoing conversation have played with, altered, and critically commented on these structural conventions and cultural implications through the art mods they produce."

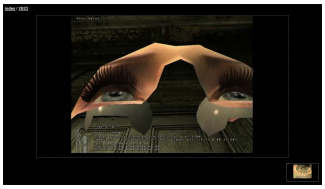
But modding also raises issues of copyright and intellectual property that are complex from the point of view of labor, transgression and subsequent commercial recuperation, which are as valid in Jorn's time as today. Practices associated with appropriation, modification and remix of digital media that had no framework before FLOSS, copyleft and the digital commons movement, loop back into the commercial game industry as a form of co-optation. As Ricardo Duque (n.p.) points out,

> La práctica del patching se ve muchas veces en problemas con temas de derechos de autor, copyrights y propiedad intelectual, porque la apropiación del código del motor del juego al estilo del readymade duchampiano (como lo dicen muchos patchers), pero al mismo tiempo, es invaluable la experiencia que se ha tenido desde su aparición, en cuanto al desarrollo de los videojuegos por parte de la misma comunidad de usuarios, que ha sido adoptada por las productoras.[3]

Building on top of the groundwork on digital "free labor" by Tiziana Terranova (2000)—who departs from the Italian Autonomy, particularly Maurizio Lazzarato's notions of "immaterial labor" (1996)—Julian Kücklich (2005: n.p.) further exposed the precarious situation and legal infringements that modders were subjected to. While criticizing the apparent benevolent licenses that the game industry started adopting, Kücklich argued for examining the relations between play and work, or "playbour," because through play, the work developed by modders "was rarely remunerated for taking the risks the industry itself shuns." Moreover, copyright terms and no-royalties would give game companies full rights and ownership over mods, by taking advantage of the fact that modders are, in Kücklich terms, "a dispersed multitude." As with the Situationist critique of institutional recuperation, modders are right in criticizing the game industry for gatekeeping and recuperation, even if cultural capital conducted some to that same industry. There is still no Modderist International, nor for that matter a Modders Union, but the potential for unionization exists.[4] Like in most corporate-sponsored code camps, whatever volunteers do falls under the prospect of being preyed upon by large-for-profit business.

Mods can take many shapes, workload and level of commitment. If patches and partial conversions have been a segment of this practice, major modifications of computer games definitely enhanced modding's ludic, artistic and critical potential. There is a history of modding and conversion that stretches back at least to the 1983 fan mod *Castle Smurfenstein*, a "Dead Smurf Software copied right parody" of the 1981 *Castle Wolfenstein*, which altered graphics, sound, text, and replaced the original Nazi characters with weaponized Smurfs (Nevins 1999; Johnson 2013). Yet mods of commercial games have been popular among fans and artists ever since *Doom*'s id Software opened their 3D game engine, id Tech 1, and then Raphaël Quinet and Brendon Wyber developed the DOS level editor DEU in 1994 (Quinet 1995).

In the wake of these developments, Orhan Kipcak and Reini Urban's *Doom* mod *Ars Doom* (1995-05) set the tone for "mobilizing an institutional critique" of the artworld via the trope of the spatial modelling of the art gallery (Cates 161). This art mod was followed by Palle Torsson and Tobias Bernstrup's unrelated, but similar approach with *Duke Nukem 3D*, in *Museum Meltdown* (1996-99), as a simulation of the Arken Museum in an FPS artworld.



Media Format 5.1 and 5.2. JODI, *Max Payne CHEATS ONLY*, 2004. Screenshots of maxpaynecheatsonly.com

Radical art mods started being implemented by artist duo JODI, for example, with the abstract mods of *Quake 1*, in *Untitled Game* (1996-01), or of *Wolfenstein 3D*, in *SOD* (1999). In *Max Payne CHEATS ONLY* (2004), JODI recreated the original game world in absurd situations by glitching spaces, features and movements of the avatar and characters in order to sabotage normative gameplay and recreate other dimensions of playing against a violent shooter game (Media Format 5.1 and 5.2). In fact, part of JODI's work inhabits the tension between critical modding, intervention, camouflaging or "masquerading," and sabotaging, in Brecht's political protest vein. They operate these strategies in the differential of source code versus interface, software scanning, or the physical space. At the art fair ARCO 2010, in Madrid, the duo used the fair's booth from the Gentili Apri gallery as a sabotaging and camouflaging device. JODI sabotaged the art-as-business-as-usual conventions with the installation *Troll* by transforming the white cube, supermarket-like space with flags that portrayed pirate net icons and logos such as Napster's, and artworks including a YouTube comments fingerprint video that acted as a counter-trolling device. On the pre-opening day—which is typically reserved to the acquisitions of VIP art collectors—JODI performed with a V for Vendetta mask in front of the now defunct Haunch of Venison's black diamond-like booth, attracting attention but also spiteful comments from the gallery owners, in a kind of *invisible theatre* act.

Media Format 6. Anne-Marie Schleiner, Joan Leandre and Brody Condon, Velvet-Strike 1.0, 2002. Screenshot from http://opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/screenshots.html

JODI's work echoes in many artistic and activist projects related to net and media art, but also to the activist, hacker, and art *modscene*. In 2002, Schleiner, Joan Leandre and Brody Condon made a curious leap with *Velvet-Strike* (Media Format 6) by modding an already-existing mod, *Counter-Strike*, as an "anti-war game modification (…)

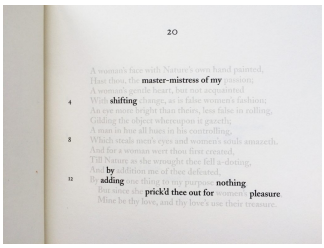
conceptualized during the beginning of Bush's 'War on Terrorism'" (Schleiner, "Velvet-Strike," n.p.). The *Half-Life* mod *Counter-Strike* had been released by two modders who, given the success, saw their mod acquired by the same company of the original game, Valve. Yet Schleiner, Leandre and Condon went further and patched the mod as a "counter-military," activist and performative work known as *Velvet-Strike*, which incorporated spraying paints that the user could manipulate to create banners with protests in the textures of the game world walls.

Mods are diverse in approach, genre and output. Often, what starts with fan-like dedication develops into community refinement. But in the case of art mods, it grows into a creative critique of the normative patterns and social behavior of the simulacra of real-life injustices, which games re-enact and often sanitize. This critique can also be seen in indie games or art games that counter such narratives and depictions, or in video mods like machinima, such as those created by Lewis and Skawennati (2018). It is also found in artistic practices such as the modification of hardware and software used in the critiques of net and *tactical media* art.

Lit Mods as Artistic and Critical Practice

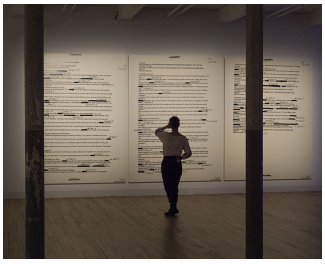
Literary mods—abbreviated as *lit mods*—can be generally described as modifications of literary works. Like art mods, lit mods are modified versions made by others than its instigators. (Works are of course modified by their authors as process, but the essential notion about modification and the mod is intervention by someone else.) Lit mods are deformations and manipulations of existing works with a creative and critical purpose. Lit mods can stem from: artistic and literary practice, where works are modified, excised, expanded, remixed, etc.; ludic and fan-like interaction, as often happens with literary games, e.g. adding or altering features; or a mix of these.

Modifications of literary works are not media-bound, in that they do not occur only with digital or computational media. Either in print or other media, works that appropriate found material and modify it with methods such as cut-up, copy-paste, collage, montage and remix can be considered lit mods as well. Appropriation is creative and critical, and so it is modification. Modification by overpainting, in order to create new literary and visual work, was explored in the 1960s, for instance in Gerhard Rühm's blackout newspaper series, Emilio Isgrò's *cancellaturas*, Doris Cross' dictionary palimpsests, or Tom Phillips' novel erasure. Poets have also been modifying poetry by deleting the work of previous authors, such as Ronald Johnson's erasure of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) in *Radi Os* (1977).



Media Format 7. Jen Bervin, *Nets*, Poem 20, Ugly Duckling Presse, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

A similar, but slightly different approach has been taken by Jen Bervin in *Nets* (2004). The poet modified and preserved Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609) by highlighting the color of certain words and sequences, thus recreating a reading path out of the pre-existing sonnet in often self-reflexive ways (Media Format 7).



Media Format 8. Jenny Holzer, *Container Big yellow white*, 2006. Oil on linen, 3 elements, 103.5 x 240 in. / 262.9 x 609.6 cm. Text: U.S. government document. Installation: *Jenny Holzer*, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, Massachusetts, USA, 2017. © 2006 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo: Jake Forney

The appropriation, reframing or reworking of documentary material such as government files has gained a renewed skeleton and skin in Jenny Holzer's use of the United States declassified documents in the series *Redaction Paintings* (2006, Media Format 8), or Carlos Soto Román's redaction of U.S. secret documents about the dictatorship of Pinochet in *Chile Project: [Re-Classified]* (2013).

Likewise, the modification of games is true for all games, not just computer games. As Mary Flanagan (285n14) points out, "nonverbal games such as rock, paper, scissors (RPS) transcend space and culture. (…) But the rules, the counting, and even the reason to play

in the first place are still culturally specific [with] local variations of RPS, including one with over fifty extra gestures thrown in, a true RPS mod with levels, new weapons/invisible scoring." Flanagan (286n38) further argues how modding can be a critical foundation of artwork that interrogates context, media and materiality: "The most potent artistic/activist projects bring an awareness of the medium to the project, and an awareness of context. (…) even 'home-brew' game makers can mod existing games, using the textures and models by others or creating these themselves." Though mostly spoken of in the context of games, the procedures of modification and modding are cross-disciplinary modes of artistic and critical practice. But the fact is the *mod* arose from a computational setting and, as an artifact, constitutes itself as a technical and cultural form within the digital realm.

In the digital realm, it is also explored by writers, albeit not usually mentioned as such within digital literary studies. Lit mods entail the production of new versions and the modification of existing code or content, whose purpose, like art mods, is not software release and updates, overhaul or technical support, but rather literary, artistic, aesthetic, and playful transformation.

Media Format 9. Nick Montfort, *Taroko Gorge*, 2009-20. Screenshot of http://nickm.com/taroko_gorge/

A straightforward and paradigmatic case of what I mean by *lit mods* unfolded with Nick Montfort's browser-based poem *Taroko Gorge* (2009-20) as an evolving and challenging practice of modding parts of its program (Media Format 9). The webpage lists no less than thirty-nine mods—of Montfort's compact JavaScript source code—by different generations of authors, starting with Scott Rettberg's *Tokyo Garage*. Adding to these, we also need to count hundreds of mods that students have been creating in courses dedicated to digital literature. That means that the recipe of repetition, randomization and variability that Montfort took in from early word slot poetry generators is still appealing as a standalone piece, as well as material for others to appropriate, mix and mod. The license of the work is clear on this:

```
Nick Montfort
 Original Python program:
 8 January 2009, Taroko Gorge National Park, Taiwan and
Eva Air Flight 28
 This JavaScript version, with links:
 5 May 2020

Copyright (c) 2009-2020 Nick Montfort nickm@nickm.com

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with or without fee is hereby granted, provided that the above copyright notice
and this permission notice appear in all copies.
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(*Taroko Gorge*, lines 7-17)

As we read the license of the program in the source code, we also come across with the potential seduction and pragmatism of compressed, annotated, and well-laid out code. The concise variables with lists of nouns, adjectives, transitive and intransitive verbs, as well as the old-fashioned line per line output are not only effective at the level of reading—even if the program's output is not always the most engaging poetry—but they also do spark the imagination of readers-writers. Do not go any further. Verification is easy: we only need to count the sheer number of existing mods to understand that this series is a sign of a reading-writing culture.

Lit Mods and Criticism

So far, my discussion revolved around mods from the point of view of artistic intervention, that is, as creative practices that contain critical approaches to art, games and literature. Now I would like to shift focus and inquire into whether this practice-led phenomenon can help and influence the modes of engagement and methods of criticism in face of complex digital artifacts.

Appropriation, reproduction, restaging, repurposing, recreation, interpretation, as well as modification are modes of creative-critical engagement that produce different exploratory paths of cognitive and artistic experience through an artwork that, in turn, create different outcomes. But all types of criticism and analysis somehow deform the works they study in productive and non-productive ways, by means of interpretation that can be closer or further away from the work. Criticism can lock down its subjects, but it can also open up radiant trajectories. Strictly speaking, there are invasive and non-invasive methods of studying artistic and literary works. Certain types of manual painting can hardly be mimicked, but its textures, colors, and palimpsestic layers can be studied by non-invasive methods such as ultraviolet photography and scanning imaging. A musical or performative score can be interpreted or restaged as a way of not only presenting the live act, but also for the performer to acquire new knowledge or skills about a particular piece. With physical media, the processes of single copies or unique artworks are more difficult to study because, out of fear of destruction, aura, and convention, they cannot be corrupted or altered as a means of interpretation or recreation. But a painting style can be copied as a way of understanding its process and results. Likewise, a literary form can be exercised as a way of reading or improving writing skills. It is not in vain that many older

poets recommend to younger ones that they go home and copy sonnets or exercise dodecasyllables. This might seem like an outmoded model—if by that model we think "know your sonnets so that you write proper poems," instead of "if you know rules and constraints, you will be able to better transgress them"—but in fact it is not. It has been playing out for centuries. Even more, the same applies to other arts, no matter what genre or media.

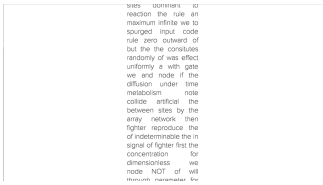
Textual work inscribed in reproductible media and material, or subject to be reproduced, can be copied and surely altered. It can be recreated, mashed-up with other texts and media, and modified for the purposes of better understanding them, with creative and critical goals. Like interventional and process-oriented methods such as translation, these are invasive methods. But there are also non-invasive methods that study texts, such as general interpretation, stylistics or stylometry. While interpretation might be in fact invasive (in the sense of Best and Marcus' "symptomatic reading"), the method is not, in the sense of preserving the original work. Now, these issues become more complex when dealing with digital media, where perspectives on what constitutes *original state*, *processes*, *mediation* and *work* greatly differ. Yet there are also invasive and non-invasive methods to study artwork produced with computational systems. Modding is one of such invasive methods. In the case of digital literature, it stimulates the direct engagement with works and it expands the practices of criticism.

How Can Lit Mods Inform the Criticism of Digital Literature?

Reading and analyzing kinetic poems that display text at an extremely rapid rate poses several challenges. First, it demands interdisciplinary frameworks and critical openness to engage with artifacts that are often generative, interactive and multimodal, that demand a complex engagement with various senses and that are difficult to *just* read. Second, they can be made even more difficult to read because the speed at which they are displayed does not give the reader enough time to perceive words and sequences, or to restage the reading process, which are vital aspects for meaning-making. Third, this effect might have been pre-conceived and programmed by the author. But it might also be caused by machine and network processing speed, platform issues, or by a number of other reasons, such as the simple negligence of these factors. Thus, how can the criticism of these works enlighten their apparently obfuscated mechanics? How can we read and explore kinetic text and poetry by intervening in order to shed light on process, output and interface?

It is clear that spatial and temporal dimensions such as on-screen speed and textual behavior are topical concerns that affect the reading experience of kinetic poems. Besides the theoretical viewpoints put forward in their analyses, digital humanists and literary critics have been progressively acquainting themselves with the layers of output, interface and source code (Marino 2006). But practical methodology rarely addresses the specific time-based media nature of these creative works. How can critics then approach literary works and poems that are time-based if not with time-based methods? Why should critics incorporate modding methods into their toolset?

In order to test this type of experimental criticism, I studied several digital kinetic poems by modding and versioning their source code and output. Given that I have already analyzed these creative works in more detail (Seiça 2018, 2020), I will now emphasize why I modified the works, how I modified the works, and what these lit mods might contribute to. Below, I briefly describe three cases where I have adapted and applied this set of methods: the first case mods Ian Hatcher's 2015 JavaScript and jQuery work *// (Total Runout)*; the second mods Stephanie Strickland and Cynthia Jaramillo's 2007 Flash work *slippingglimpse*; finally, the third mods Montfort's 2015 JavaScript work *Una Página de Babel*.



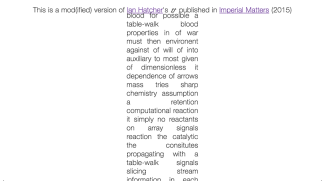
Media Format 10. Ian Hatcher, *// (Total Runout)*, 2015. Screenshot of http://ianhatcher.net/projects/tro/.

Hatcher's *// (Total Runout)* (TRO) is a kinetic poem that only machines can "read," if by *reading* we mean *executing* (Media Format 10). Exploring and inspecting the work quickly leads to identifying three variables in the source code that contain the source texts —one of which is a 2001 UK's MoD leaked security document—as well as the scripted functions in JavaScript that point to the chaining and generation of the output text. Yet it is difficult to fully understand, and obviously impossible to visualize how the parsing of the three texts affect the transitions and behavior of the displayed textual event. Slowing down the extremely fast unfolding text may help coping with this problem. For that purpose, I tried two methods: screencast modification and code modification.

TRO slo-mo mod from Alvaro Seica on Vimeo.

Media Format 11. Álvaro Seiça, *TRO Slo-mo Mod*, 2017. Modification of a screencast of Ian Hatcher's *// (Total Runout)*. Embedded video from http://vimeo.com/206581420

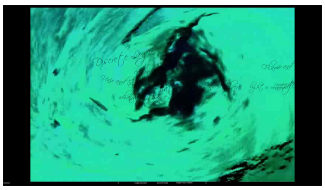
The first experiment, *TRO Slo-mo Mod*, is a slow-motion version of a screencast, that is, an output mod version of a recording of the original work (Media Format 11). To arrive at a useful deformation, I set the screencast sequence timebase to thirty frames per second and then reduced the speed duration of the whole clip to ten percent. Therefore, the initial one-minute recording slows down and becomes ten times longer, that is, when exported, it turns into a ten-minute long video clip. Yet this new visual experience does not seem very productive, since comparing the mod and its original version does not disclose any particular features that you could not observe in the original.



Media Format 12. Álvaro Seiça, *TRO Mod*, 2017. Modification of Ian Hatcher's 2015 code. Screenshot of http://alvaroseica.net/setInterval/tro/TROmod.html.

At this point, I thought of playing around with the work's source code. So, the second experiment, *TRO Mod*, is a source code mod of the timers scripted by Hatcher (Media Format 12). Increasing the number of milliseconds in the setTimeOut functions renders the intervals bigger and, as such, it creates slower textual transitions on screen, which originally separated, shuffled and rejoined the three texts at a vertiginous pace. By modifying the variable "time" from thirty to 7,000 milliseconds, and another temporal parameter in the growing function of the text block from 3,000 to 5,000 milliseconds, the textual event slows down drastically. It is important to mention that the original work has two interactive functions that allow the user to hover and click in its graphical interface. Hovering the cursor over the text block returns a black area, while clicking on the text block propagates the color black in full screen—it is game over; access denied as the user shuts down the system while trying to understand it.

Within the thematic context of the piece, this action-reaction symbolizes the obfuscated structures and black boxing of US-UK governance and secret security agencies. The user is, in fact, being conceptually shut down. Now, modifying the above mentioned code's timeout values also effects a slower response from the text block, which behaves like an expanding and contracting curtain. It is only then that it is possible to observe a *magic* action, which obviously had been always present, coded and outputted, but the eye could not see. Because of the text block's increasing and decreasing width, the text replacement is happening not only by chaining and generative algorithms, but also by the sheer fact that the justified column of text breaks the lines and additionally moves down even more words. From a behavior point of view, contrasting this mod with the original version is revealing of the mechanics, processing, effect and affect of the work, because it means that it was scripted in order to multiply the speed of the textual movement and to induce a much stronger sense of information overflow in the viewer. Thus, the process that generates the viewer's experience—while watching and trying to read this seemingly unified textual stream—ingeniously acts as a proof of concept of the work's themes.



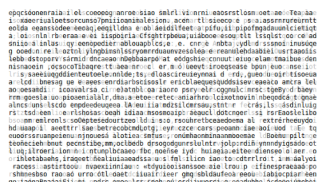
Media Format 13. Stephanie Strickland, Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo, and Paul Ryan, *slippingglimpse*, 2007. Screenshot of http://slippingglimpse.org.

In the second case, Strickland and Jaramillo's poem suite *slippingglimpse* (Media Format 13), because of the proprietary nature of Flash, and before the authors sent me some of the work's files, I was struggling to understand their claim regarding how the "water reads the text" and how "the text reads the water," as well as the movement and specific trajectories of the "text fields." In this case, since I did not have access to all the source code, I employed one method with one outcome: the *slippingglimpse fast forward mod* (Media Format 14).

slippingglimpse fast forward mod from Alvaro Seica on Vimeo.

Media Format 14. Álvaro Seiça, *slippingglimpse fast forward mod*, 2017. Modification of a screencast of Strickland and Jaramillo's *slippingglimpse*. Embedded video from http://vimeo.com/207029923

This experiment consists of fast-forwarding a screen recording of the work's traversal. It sets the screencast sequence timebase to thirty frames per second and then speeds up the duration of the video clip by 275%. The initial thirty-minute recording shrinks to ten minutes. If we contrast this output mod with the original piece, we start clearly seeing visual patterns that emerge in the behavior of the "text fields" and their trajectories—how they rotate and scale vis-à-vis the X, Y position of the "attractors," only later to read in the annotated code that the attractors' position is triggered and regenerated at each ten-pixel variation. What happens is that, with acceleration, the regeneration process of the text's rotation and scaling becomes strikingly evident and can, thus, be further explored and studied.



Media Format 15. Nick Montfort, *Una Página de Babel*, 2015. Screenshot of http://nickm.com/poems/babel.html. Courtesy of the artist

The third example, *Una Página de Babel* (Media Format 15), is a program released by Montfort that displays all the glyphs of Jorge Luis Borges' short story "La Biblioteca de Babel" (1941) at incredible high speed. By using the method `window.setInterval(render, 0)` the impact on the CPU and GPU is no less than rapid battery drain, while your fan tries to cool down the overheat. If you have experienced intense cryptocurrency mining, it is a similar user experience. The 15,881 glyphs are activated by the `function glyph()`, which recombines and splits them in a minimalistic and conceptual manner.

In order to investigate the work, I explored the source code by trial and error, and modified its parameters with the goal of understanding what would happen when the code would run again on a browser. After experimenting with several versions, I tested yet another one by editing the glyph frequency list and adding lexemes. Because at the time I was working through my dissertation (Seiça 2018), whose title references the commonly used timer method `setInterval()`, it seemed appropriate to think about the dissertation as my own Babel.

Media Format 16. Álvaro Seiça, *Una Página de Babel Mod*, 2017. Modification of Nick Montfort's 2015 code. Screenshot of http://alvaroseica.net/setInterval/babel-mod.html

The resulting mod added some of the fifteen most frequent words in the corpus of the dissertation to Montfort's glyph list (Media Format 16). To mark the modding intervention, it reversed Borges' description of the library—that is, the universe's books as having black letters—and the subsequent application made by Montfort.

Media Format 17. Álvaro Seiça, *Una Página de Babel Mod* v2, 2020. Version 2 of the mod of Nick Montfort's 2015 code. Screenshot of http://alvaroseica.net/setInterval/babel-mod-v2.html

But what would happen if I was to actually include all the lexemes from the entire corpus of the dissertation? If we think of words, there are 126,998 words with 122,366 spaces. Like Borges' *ab aeterno* permutational library, and Montfort's conceptual page reframing and recreation, the second mod (Media Format 17) displays a multiplicity of versions of my study that hold the potential of, at a given instance, displaying the syntactical order of a fragment of the corpus. In Montfort's case, it is interesting because it encapsulates the potential of the part of the description of the library itself, as per Borges, that at a given instance might be displayed in one page—the part describing the whole and the whole contained in the part.

These mods are in fact a confusing and frustrating annihilation of my study, but they clearly, and most importantly, enact the paradox of reading-writing about extremely fast kinetic text events using the description of that same paradox. In addition, these mods break Montfort's neat grid into a recurrent and sparking animation whether in the margins or within. Once you introduce lexemes instead of glyphs, the spatial output arrangement is completely different. This has relevant consequences in terms of processual and compositional decisions made by the author. If I had not modified and paid attention to Montfort's code, I would not have realized the fact that the program needs to strictly use a monospace font so that the generation of the glyphs displays a square and perfect grid so that the letters are symmetrical—thus resembling Borges' explanation that each page in the library of Babel has forty lines with approximately eighty letters each (as Jonathan Basile also replicated in the holistic project *libraryofBabel.info*).

Methods that engage with, and analyze the inner workings of digital literature are not new per se. Other critics have stressed the importance of such approaches: for instance, Montfort and Strickland, in the code annotations of *Sea and Spar Between* (2010), Chris Funkhouser, in "How to Read a Digital Poem," Jessica Pressman, Mark Marino, and Jeremy Douglass, in *Reading Project* (2015), or Marino in *Critical Code Studies* (2020).

Literary and artistic works that are written in digital systems cannot be fully understood and explored without the praxis of their processes and interfaces. This approach is fully embodied in creative-critical code practices such as Montfort and Strickland's "cut to fit the toolspun course" (2010, 2013), a version of annotated code that expands the

possibilities for essay-writing in form and content. Their elegant annotations were published in the comments of the source code of the work itself, *Sea and Spar Between*. In the file sea_spar.js (2010: lines 880-906; 2013: lines 904-30), the poets remark that:

> // It is clear that works of electronic literature and digital art need to
> // be studied by operating them, examining not only their outputs but also
> // their interfaces. By writing about Sea and Spar Between within its main
> // code file, we mean to invite critics to also look beneath the interface
> // and consider the code level. Considering code allows those interested
> // in aesthetic and poetic computing to learn more about the literary and
> // technical decisions that were made with regard to appearance, interface,
> // and underlying function.
> //
> // While we think that many types of poetic, aesthetic, and humanistic
> // code deserve consideration, we also want to present our work in Sea
> // and Spar Between as something that is related to, but distinct from, a
> // typical digital humanities project. We are working to develop a
> // computational poetics. In creating Sea and Spar Between, we were
> // more concerned with poesis, with making, than with the analysis of
> // texts. In this edition, "cut to fit the toolspun course," we have
> // extended the project to show how critical discourse can be added at the
> // code level. In this particular case, it is a gloss by the authors; but
> // in the future, comments-as-commentary might also be written by critics,
> // editors, and curators.
> //
> // In closing, our final claim: the most useful critique is a new
> // constitution of elements. On one level, a reconfiguration of a source
> // code file to add comments -- by the original creator or by a critic --
> // accomplishes this task. But in another, and likely more novel, way,
> // computational poetics and the code developed out of its practice
> // produce a widely distributed new constitution.

The reader is faced with a “computational poetics” proposal that functions as well as a critique of glossy digital humanities projects that do not engage with programming practices, and that invites critics, editors and curators to engage with code. The core notion of their invitation is that exploratory procedures about programming are fundamental for an understanding of poetics in digital systems. This “new constitution of elements” might mean reflecting and writing about, and for that matter, directly on the source code: “a reconfiguration of a source code file.” But this reconfiguration, “the most useful critique,” can also mean other ways of exploring the source code and the output of works, such as modding.

Lit Mods Beyond Digital Literature

Understanding mods as well in the context of "deformance" leads to an engagement with the sort of experimental literary criticism put forward by Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann in "Deformance and Interpretation." For Samuels and McGann (36), the notion and methods of "deformative criticism," as a model for rethinking a critique of textuality, involve deforming poems in four different ways:

> reordered (for example, reading backward), isolating (for example, reading only verbs or other parts of speech), altering (exteriorizing variants—potential versions—of words in the work; or altering the spatial organization, typography, or punctuation of a work), and adding (perhaps the most subjective of our deformative poetics).

The modding methods I employed, and the modding poetics I described above have common traits with Samuels and McGann's proposal of "deformative poetics." Lit mods are, in some way, modifying deformances that could fall under what they call "altering." Lit mods also share commonalities with creative approaches of deformance, such as Snelson's—for instance, in *Feverish Propagations* (2009), a recreation and sound deformance of Rosmarie Waldrop's poetry, or in the creative-critical explorations of "Variable Format" (2015). Besides, they can be contrasted with Mark Sample's adaptations, mashups and modifications of several print and digital-born works, as in *Hacking the Accident* and *House of Leaves of Grass*.

Following Sample's argument in "Notes towards a Deformed Humanities," it becomes natural to contend that deformative methods can be seen as creative interventions—what Samuels and McGann refer to as "subjective," rather than tout court criticism. Moreover, Sample argues, "deformance (…) reinscribes more conventional acts of interpretation, (…) [as it] always circles back to the text" (n.p.). Due to these facts, Sample proposes a change in vocabulary from "deformance" to "deformed" to stress the departure to something else, *deformity* rather than *deformance*, and to acknowledge the "deformed work [as] the end, not the means to the end." Sample does not want to go back to the original. He rather wants to focus on the destabilizing systems per se. I am not sure if this slight distinction in terms helps highlighting Sample's critique of procedures, but I do agree with his point of view that the "deformed humanities" are a "legitimate mode of scholarship, (…) of *doing* and *knowing*. Precisely because it relies on undoing and unknowing" (n.p., emphasis original).

Thus, this is exactly where the positive potential of mods resides. As they introduce rupture and difference, mods can help in fueling the work of critical inquiry by way of contrasting. By default, the mod makes possible file comparison, but also program or software output comparison. In this sense, variation is only possible because difference exists, because change has been implanted. In computer science, the length between an original version, or a previous version, and the next, is often called a "diff." In other words, a diff shows the data changes between two instances of the same file. So, as a technical and cultural form, the mod has an interventional character in digital culture that surely can inspire rich and valuable thinking.

Modding literary works or other digital artifacts entails Stockburger's practice-led argument: "Quite often, modding a game, providing a new skin for an avatar or creating a whole new level, generates better knowledge of its technology and functions" (29). This practical approach intimately relates to what most digital literature authors and humanists do when they critically engage in modifying existing work, code, or platforms, or when they build new tools, libraries, or infrastructure for their projects. In striving to better understand its objects and methods of study, digital humanists can discover other types of exploratory thinking closer to *poiesis*. As Snelson (2015: 180) advocates,

> Samuels and McGann, [and] scholars like Alan Liu emphasize the necessity for new poetic forms within the field of humanities computing. Given the importance of form and process in the criticism of digital objects, the digital humanities would do well to turn not only to data visualization and information design for answers, but also to contemporary art and poetry.

Lit mods can be such a poetic form. In addition, as a cultural form, the mod clearly represents cross-disciplinary creative practices with a critical and subversive ethos that can stimulate the criticism of art, games, and literature with the sociopolitical underpinning that Brecht envisaged. As Kücklich remarks, "Modding could emerge from its dilemma as a cultural practice that extends beyond the confines of digital games. After all, modding is a practice that transcends the rules we have come to take for granted." The mod thus embodies exploratory and collaborative tactics which, in line with Jorn's praxis, whether amateur or professional, are often ludic and interventional. At the level of criticism, that means that these practices can contribute to overhaul our modes of engagement with digital art and literary works. This trait constitutes a fundamental dialogue between practice and practice-led criticism that fosters collaboration, questions, debate, but also understanding and analysis. [5] As a processual approach, modding enacts new learning and discovery of coding and processing, and how it affects output, display, and interface. In this respect, lit mods contribute to ways of defamiliarizing the encounters with existing work, of re-assessing assumptions, of calibrating subjective judgement, but also, and fundamentally, of playing along with someone else's work and underlaying algorithms. While this is true with other modes of critical engagement, the acts of appropriating, demounting, reassembling, and modding works devise pathways to access and potentially create novel appreciation of procedural mechanisms and processes. These hermeneutic methods open new prospects and insights for digital literary studies, literary criticism and digital humanities, but more broadly, for a number of disciplines invested in the criticism of digital artifacts. For, as Brecht would say, "Modify your machine, saboteur!"

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