

Better with the Sound On; or, The Singularity of Reading and Writing Under Constraint

electronicbookreview.com/essay/better-with-the-sound-on-or-the-singularity-of-reading-and-writing-under-constraint

October 2, 2021

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10-03-2021

This essay was peer-reviewed.



With a focus on sound elements in the e-literary, Hannah Ackermans insightfully traces the role of accessibility and (dis)ability in electronic literature. Problematizing the universality of electronic literature practices and rewriting the familiar concepts (such as defamiliarization or constraint), she uses the notion of accessibility as a perspective that both proposes inclusive models of electronic literature and helps to understand creative work on a fundamental, material level.

Audio Player

A recording of rain sounds just started playing on this webpage.

Perhaps you are hearing that, and you find my opening line redundant.

Perhaps you do not hear any sound, either because you are deaf/HOH or because you are in a public space and did not bring headphones.

Perhaps you did not expect a sound and still had your audio on 100%, oh dear, and now you frantically turn it down to a 'normal' register.

Perhaps you hear the sound and find it annoying, because either it is distracting for you or because you are reading this text with a screen reader and the rain sound interferes with it.

Perhaps you love it because it is calming, or just 'distracting enough' for you to focus on the text.

Or you, like me, might hear that there is a sound playing, but your hearing impairment means you cannot distinguish it as rain. The sounds makes you a little nervous, as there might be signifiers that you are missing in interpreting the work.

What is formal invention?

All I did was add one simple sound to my text, but the range of possibilities in reception are wide. We like to think of multimodal works as "formally inventive", yet as this small example shows, there is no such thing as purely formal. My formal invention of playing sound behind a text is material, situated, and embodied.

Every formal invention results in a range of possible experiences. Growing attached to a form because it results in one specific experience denies this multiplicity in different bodies and minds. This is most prominent when it comes to disabled bodyminds and perhaps for this reason, accessibility of multimedia works can be a sore point.

Is Electronic Literature Universal?

Let's rewind a little bit. Although electronic literature resists clear-cut boundaries, its proposed definitions usually include some form of self-reflexivity. Electronic literature uses the affordances of the networked computer in ways that push the texts to reflect on these affordances. Joseph Tabbi's seminal essay "Electronic Literature as World Literature, or, the Universality of Writing under Constraint" posits electronic literature as a new form of world literature, which unites a diverse set of authors in its search for form and distribution rather than language and stories.

In these new configurations, the world-literary ambition for *freedom* becomes surprisingly, and intimately, aware of the constraints on expression and the creative redistribution of texts, contexts, and source texts. And this in turn creates new and various understandings of how to realize, through these newly available archive of *all* texts, past and present, written and in progress, the *universality* and borderlessness of a possible world literature. (25, original emphasis)

Electronic literature has a lot of potential for universality and borderlessness, but exclusory practices also slip into the experimentation and customs of digital writing. And this is especially clear when we center accessibility.

Taking his conceptualization of experimental writing as a force of universality, I rewrite Tabbi's arguments to interrogate the role of accessibility and (dis)ability in the field of electronic literature. This diffraction means we find both inconsistencies and pearls of wisdom that the original (con)text did not provide. For example, Tabbi states that:

What is universal is instead the ability, by observing the constraints on the current world system as it configures itself in our actual writing spaces, to enter into meaningful conversations with other creators in written as well as nonwritten forms (26).

An interesting statement, considering that ability is not universal but instead bound up with a variety of biopsychosocial phenomena. Yet this makes the rest of the sentence even more salient. Because "What is **universal singular** is instead the ability, by observing the constraints on the current world system as it configures itself in our actual writing spaces, to enter into meaningful conversations with other creators in written as well as nonwritten forms". "Constraints", then, becomes a more powerful concept, which encompasses both formal constraints with artistic practice and constraints produced on a societal level. "Meaningful conversations" take place as an exchange of abilities and perceptions "in written as well as nonwritten forms".

Reflections on terminology

As such, this essay provides a space for you to imagine different people, to consider closely that your bodymind works differently from other bodyminds. This approach potentially allows for a philosophical degeneration into a conversation where words as 'disabled' and 'abled' become meaningless, because everyone is different anyway. Despite the temporarily enlightened feeling of this realization, this would disregard the systemic exclusion of disabled people. In this space where we imagine bodyminds different from ourselves, we need to interrogate the consistency with which people are included and excluded based on their abilities. Following scholars such as Sami Schalk, I will therefore refer to '(dis)abilities' to convey the differences in physical and sensory apparatuses of different potential readers.

I write this essay as a PhD scholar in digital culture with a background in comparative literature, speaking directly to scholars and artists in electronic literature. As such, I will use a variety of sources from disability studies, but my main structure and argument will come from concepts in our own field.

Defamiliarization – The Gate

Who among us has not experienced literature as a gateway to a renewed and expanded understanding of the world around us as well as ourselves? According to Tabbi, "what is literary about world literature can be recognized in this capacity to disturb the smooth operation of global communities, using textual instruments whose operations are largely conceptual" (26). The viewpoint of accessibility provides us with the opportunity to consider what 'smooth operations' are and what/who is disturbed by world literature. Within literary studies, the answer is simple: defamiliarization. A concept originating in Russian Formalism, defamiliarization aims to explain the difference between the effects of practical language and poetic language. Poetic language, according to Viktor Shklovsky, has the effect of defamiliarization. By choosing to use language more opaque than it practically needs to be, we see what is described in a new light.

Although there are a variety of approaches to electronic literature, there is a continued assumption that difficulty raises quality, a position perhaps most explicitly held by Eugenio Tisselli and Rui Torres, among other places in their essay "In Defense of the Difficult". They assert that "the ways in which we engage with literature are doomed to become progressively detached and inconsequential, always in search of the quick 'like,' incapable of critique below the shiny, polished, touch-sensitive surface of things" (n.p.). The antidote is the difficult which cannot easily be consumed by everyone, but instead embodies, in Philippe Bootz's terms, an "aesthetics of frustration" (7). This is not unique to (electronic) literature, but also omnipresent in games. Sarah Gibbons argues that "efforts to make games more accessible meet with overt and subtle resistance" (31) and even speaks of a "*culture of difficulty* and a belief that only certain players deserve to advance" (31, my emphasis). This culture of difficulty is present in various ways in electronic literature, perhaps unsurprising given its roots in experimental literature. The need to disturb the smooth operations is presented as a way to defamiliarize the omnipresence of digital technologies in our lives.

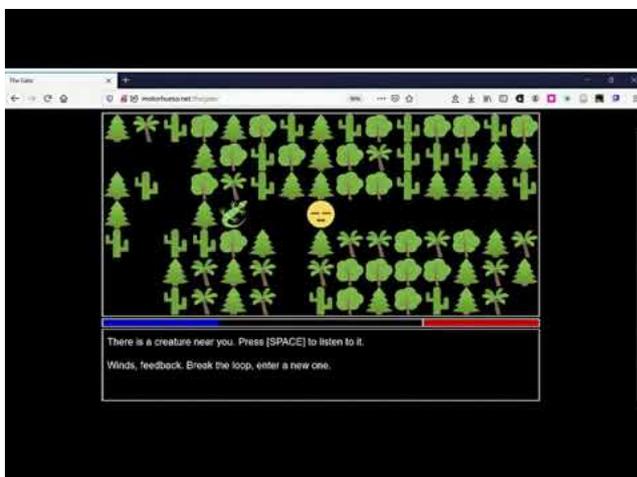
What does this mean in terms of accessibility? Multimodal works have many opportunities for both accessibility and inaccessibility. After all, if difficulty and multimodality is the objective of the work, there is the assumption that accessibility must be aligned with dumbing things down for the reader. One main concept to understand here is that many media are inaccessible for disabled people. If a work is supposed to defamiliarize, its author(s) need to consider what is familiar to a variety of audiences. Jonathan Lazar and Paul Jaeger discuss web accessibility:

Despite the existence of assistive devices and accessibility guidelines, if a Web site is not designed in a manner that it is flexible enough to work with various assistive devices, there is nothing that the user can do that will lead to successful use of the site. It's not a matter of a user with a disability upgrading to a new version of software or purchasing a new hardware device. If a Web site isn't designed for accessibility, no action on the user's side will make interaction successful. (74)

Although general web accessibility may have different goals than electronic literature, the same principle is at play. The defamiliarization of electronic literature provides a powerful force against the mainstream digital media, considering reader engagement and reflection in its success rather than attention counted in time and size of the audience. The argument that electronic literature purposefully asks a lot from the reader does not negate accessibility. Without accessibility, "no action on the user's side will make interaction successful" – there is no defamiliarization, just the all-too-familiar experience of being overlooked.

Given the large variety of disabilities, it follows that and what makes a work accessible for some people might make it inaccessible to others. It is not my suggestion to start criticizing individual creators but rather to use accessibility as a lens to understand creative work on a fundamental, material level. Keeping this in mind, I will now briefly analyze one interaction element of Eugenio Tisselli's *_The Gate* as a manifestation of the culture of difficulty.

The Gate



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/Vc1SSFN96sI>

Implications of Accessibility in The Gate

There are a large variety of disabilities in the world and design elements in media, but here I will zoom in on just one consideration. *The Gate* mainly uses the keyboard for navigation and interaction. This is a helpful interaction design for people with motoric problems, who often have difficulty with using a mouse. A caveat is that typing in the animal sounds cannot be undone. If you make a typo, you have to leave the gatekeeper and come back to try again. What does this mean? Would adding the option of using the backspace be dumbing down the game because it is easier to correct mistakes?

Rather than think of this in terms of easy and difficult, this issue allows us to think about the effects that design choices have – an approach familiar to us, considering electronic literature's focus on self-reflexivity. Is the lesson that you are not allowed to make mistakes and that you have to listen very carefully? Is typing without typos actually an indication of being more attentive? What is gained and lost by having and not having a backspace option? These are relevant questions for such an urgent work on the climate crisis, especially when considering that the effects of the climate crisis do not affect groups of people equally. Disabled people are disproportionately affected by the effects of the climate crisis as the loss of resources that might signify diminished comfort for abled bodyminds could be life threatening for disabled people. At the same time, disabilities are too often disregarded in disaster plans as well as utopian views for the future. Any contemplation on the climate crisis then would do well be inclusive of disabled people.

This perspective lays bare all the uncontrollable effects of the reader experience as well as the responsibility of the author to imagine the creative work not only through the lens of their own bodymind but by imagining others' as well. The multiplicity of experiences complicates the simplicity of defamiliarization. This provides the opportunity to further the self-reflexivity of electronic literature in the multitude of ways in which digital culture functions in society.

Writing Under Constraint – Byderhand

Writing under constraint refers to a variety of literary devices in which the author must adhere to certain conditions, some of which are "tied to the technical limitations of a device or network" (Salter 533). These self-imposed constraints push one's creativity to find new meanings and forms. As such, Anastasia Salter assesses that "writing under constraint is less about the formal structures imposed by outside forces and rules and more about the author's deliberate decision to embrace constraints as a path to creation" (533). In electronic literature, we often associate writing under constraint with the avant garde literary group Oulipo, which introduced "often structurally demanding ways of generating texts and working with limited frameworks" (Salter 533). Michelle Grangaud, for example, wrote the poetry collection *Stations*, which entirely consists of anagrams of Parisian metro station names. The restraints, then, are generally related to the formal characteristics of language or media. In this manner, the constraint resists the ways in which we commonly use language. And the results can be powerful, as Tabbi argues:

Resistance too figures not as a political opposition but as a resituation of the person within a network of relations. Precisely because the author is made aware of constraints, he or she must find, within language, resources that would otherwise not be found, and this is particularly evident when the author brings forward constraints that are often forgotten in print, lettering, and other materials of signification. (48)

The constraint is often random, like Georges Perec's novel *La Disparition* without the letter e, but through the lens of disability, constraints can become meaningful because you have to interrogate your medium by making it more accessible. Rereading Tabbi, again, from the generative perspective of disability, transforms the meaning of resistance. The "resistance" becomes a resistance against normative practices that exclude disabled people from digital culture, often on various levels of organization, technology development and personal ignorance. Unlike Oulipo's self-imposed constraints, then, the "resituation of the person within a network of relations", from the perspective of disability, is not in contrast to "political opposition" but rather an expression of political opposition. Rewriting Tabbi, we can say that: "*Resistance* too figures ~~not~~ as a political opposition ~~but~~ as a resituation of the person within a network of relations. Precisely because the author is made aware of constraints, he or she must find, within language, resources that would otherwise not be found, and this is particularly evident when the author brings forward constraints that are often forgotten in print, lettering, and other materials of signification".

Accessibility is still part of the periphery of electronic literature, but there are pioneers in the creative production at hand. In the next paragraph, I will briefly analyze the creative effects of accessibility of the work *Byderhand*.

Byderhand



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/sjY9xhE3Sx0>

Implications of Accessibility in Byderhand

A variety of constraints leads to a variety of creative practices for various audiences. These various creativities lead to different experiences for different people without exclusion. Locative narratives generally center on the visual. Even when the work itself is auditory, the locative effect often comes from experiencing the work while looking at one's

specific surroundings and listening to the work at the same time. *Byderhand* effectively decentralizes the visual in the locative narrative in a resourceful manner that pushes the creative practice to include creativities it might not otherwise have found. Instead of a creative work plus accessibility, then, *Byderhand's* creative development is inherently shaped by the 'constraint' of accessibility.

Sacred Accountability

In "All Technology is Assistive", Sara Hendren argues "whether you're designing for an established need or seeking an application for a technical novelty, you might take more time before confidently assigning it to a user, or to deciding, up front, with confidence, *how* it will be used. It might be for practical ends, or for play, or for something else you've not yet imagined". This leads to questions: "what can a body do? What needs are you interested in? Who might use which thing for what? Where might the surprises be? How might a familiar thing morph into something else altogether?" These questions show an artistic interrogation with the users or audience of technology similar to the interrogation of textual elements in writing under constraint. Hendren outlines six rules for designers and artists to take into account: 'invisibility is overrated', 'rethink the default bodily experience', 'consider fine gradations of qualitative change', 'uncouple medical technologies from their diagnostic contexts', 'design for one', and 'let the tools you make ask questions, not just solve problems'. Similarly, rules, or a set of considerations, for digital accessibility can lead to a further appreciation and interrogation of media technologies used and produced in electronic literature. Thinking about accessibility in this manner increases creativity and understanding of the creative works and their potential audiences. Mia Mingus asks "what if accountability wasn't rooted in punishment, revenge, or superficiality, but rooted in our values, growth, transformation, healing, freedom and liberation? (n.p.). Accountability to accessibility is often seen as an attack, but it is rooted in electronic literature values of creativity, aesthetics, and materiality. Positing accessibility as writing under constraint, a method we hold in such high regard, then, we might consider: "What if accountability wasn't scary? It will never be easy or comfortable, but what if it wasn't scary? What if our own accountability wasn't something we ran from, but something we ran towards and desired, appreciated, held as sacred?" (Mingus n.p.). And what is held as sacred is almost always shared. Accessibility requires this shared accountability, that includes the writers, but also publishers and developers who make a dedicated effort to reimagine the (dis)abilities of their potential audiences.

No One Size Fits All – No World 4 Tomorrow

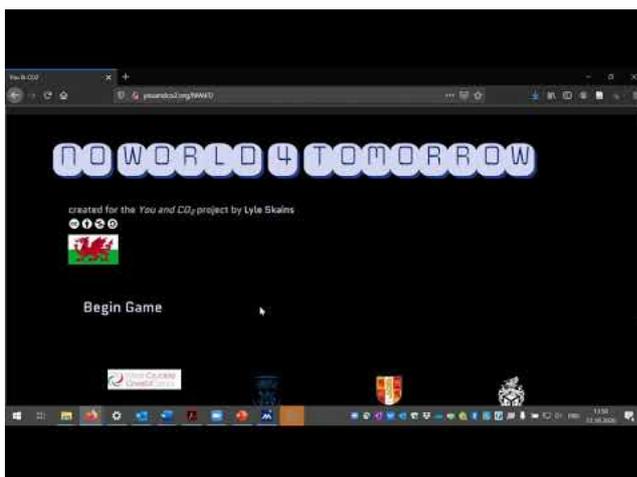
Across media, different works of art are perceived and appreciated by different (groups of) people. It is impossible to take everyone's needs and wishes and preferences into account for every work. At the start of his article, Tabbi asks "Will world literature's *exclusivity* necessarily be reproduced in the migration of reading and writing practices to electronic environments?" (25). He seems to answer this question affirmative by the end of the paper, saying: "The *social*, democratically open, but evaluative and restrictive activities are primary" (45). In other words, there will be no concessions when it comes to the quality of the work, but no one should be actively excluded from it for example based

on geographic location. Not everything is for everyone, but one must still think through which groups of people are systematically excluded. What our quality signifiers are actually representing, in this case based on (dis)ability, guides how we shape the world of tomorrow.

Tobin Siebers interrogates the social constructions that are created in each technology and design. "When handicapped entrances to buildings are located in the rear, next to garbage cans, a social construction is revealed and must be read. When a cosmetic surgeon removes the thumb on a little boy's right hand because he was born with no thumb on his left hand, a social construction is revealed and must be read" (289). Likewise, when a work of electronic literature does not contain image description or audio captions/transcripts, a social construction is revealed and must be read. And these social constructions are created and revealed in practice, regardless of whether or not authors had the intention to exclude minority groups.

This line of thought is not unfamiliar to electronic literature. N. Kathrine Hayles, a founder and well-respected scholar in the field, states that "reflexivity is the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a changed perspective, to become part of the system it generates" (8). She goes on to say: "we do not see a world 'out there' that exists apart from us. Rather, we see only what our systemic organization allows us to see"(11). Although not explicitly about disability, but rather a general human nature, we can see Hayles' arguments on systemic organization implemented in our technology within the context of social construction. It is, then, an important question who is included and excluded within these systemic organizations. The role of accessibility and disability cannot be separated from the intended audience. To make his clear, I will briefly reflect on Lyle Skains' work *No World 4 Tomorrow*.

No World 4 Tomorrow



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/RE17YI2ITnk>

Implications of Accessibility in No World 4 Tomorrow

No World 4 Tomorrow was created for a specific intended audience of children between ages 12-15, and within a larger project that includes classroom reflection on the story. The classroom setting further narrows down the intended audience to those people who are at that age and are able to take part at a certain level of education. As such, it would be meaningless to complain that the work might not be accessible, for example, for younger children. After all, it was not meant for them. Within the intended audience, however, the work needs to be as inclusive as one can be. As the work was produced in this specific context, Skains researched the age group and their reading levels to make sure the work would be a good fit for young people between age 12 and 15. It is likely that a percentage of the teenagers in this classroom project will have one or more learning disabilities that affect their reading experience. In collaboration with a specialist in special needs education, the work is adapted for students with learning disabilities. *No World 4 Tomorrow* now has a new font and the option to look up definitions and pronunciations of difficult words. These adaptations are key in successfully addressing the intended audience.

Universal Design

One common model for accessibility is Universal Design. Universal Design originated in architecture and now made its way into IT. The intent on Universal Design is to create works in such a way that people with any type of (dis)ability would be able to access the work. In "Universal Design and Its Discontents", Richard H. Godden warns readers that "universal design becomes too close to the idea of one-size-fits-all in Enlightenment political liberalism" (247). He relates how research results that show writing longhand or reading physical books are better than typing or reading digitally neglect disabled writers/readers who need digital technology. Electronic literature operates similarly on the other end of the spectrum. Glorification of multimedia and reluctance to provide accessibility tools because the work is meant to be multimedial show a neglect of disabled readers who necessarily miss part of the work. At the same time, we need to create space for disabled users to create work that pushes boundaries in their own media experiences. In that case the intended audience can be people who have a similar disability. Could we, then, simply say that the intended audience of all multimedial works are people without any disabilities? Well, factually, this is the case already. But that begs the question why we are so invested in telling stories in a manner that only able-bodied people can experience? Why are we so intent on excluding people who do not have a normative sensory apparatus or physical abilities? Accessibility is simply far more creative.

Concluding/Opening Remarks

Convention dictates that I end this essay with concluding remarks. The 'concluding' remarks, however, are meant to open up the conversation by offering some broader perspectives which I could not incorporate in this first exploratory essay. For more practical guidance, I also want to point to the work-in-progress Accessible Bits, a project led by Deena Larsen, in which we compile a list of resources and best practices for electronic literature authors who wish to make their work more accessible.

Sami Schalk researches the representation of (dis)ability in speculative fiction as:

The genre of speculative fiction particularly lends itself to such complexity because its nonrealist conventions can be used to highlight the socially constructed, and therefore mutable, nature of concepts like (dis)ability, race, and gender. By reimagining the meanings and possibilities of bodyminds, speculative fiction can alter the meanings of these categories, requiring readers and critics alike to adapt our modes of reading, interpretation, and analysis or develop new ones. (9)

Rather than on the level of representation, electronic literature can also be speculative on the level of materiality and media. Jill Walker Rettberg's forthcoming paper in *Electronic Book Review* argues for electronic literature as speculative interfaces that explore how stories can be told. We can combine this speculative interfaces approach with accessibility by exploring the creative ways in which accessibility can be furthered. Works of electronic literature, then, are speculative (non)fictions as they speculate what literature could be along the axes of medium, authorship, readership, and content. Schalk encourages "reading within the rules of the reality of a text" (24). Interpreting this in regards to speculative interfaces, important questions become whether disabled people exist within the reality of the text as well as how the modality and materiality of the text is used to signify certain expectations and values placed on the reader. Using disability for both accessibility for disabled people and interrogation of materiality is essential for developing a rich inclusive practice that takes the differences in reception seriously across the board. It is never only 'what if' disabled people wants to read this, but the assumption that we already are.

In this essay, I focused on the formal inventiveness of electronic literature. Of course, moving forward, there are a variety of aspects to take into account. We need to consider the history of technology development, in which ableism is engrained alongside anti-ableist practices. In addition to form, representation of disability in the content of works also mirrors and influences how disability is viewed and (de)stigmatized. And simulations almost by definition do not envision an audience of people who have that disability. Finally, works of electronic literature do not exist in a vacuum but are often encountered in exhibition spaces at festivals. This means that not only the works themselves but also the spaces need to be accessible. Just as with formal invention, these aspects are not electronic literature + history, narratives + representation, or exhibitions + assistance, but again the opportunity to deepen our understanding of technologies, stories, spaces, and most importantly people.

Soothing Words

The main argument in Tabbi's paper is that: "dissociating reading and writing from electronic media [...] fail[s] to entertain the idea that writing produced in new media might in fact *be* an emerging world literature" (20). Throughout my rewriting of his work, I have problematized the universality of past electronic literature practices from the perspective of (dis)ability. Can we speak of electronic literature as world literature if it systematically excludes a marginalized group and prides itself on this exclusion? Can we instead consider the singularity of writing under constraint as a way to develop new practices and

understand our technology better from a kaleidoscope perspective of different effects of literature? Tabbi comforts *Poetics Today* readers that "new media bode neither an 'end of books' nor an 'end of literature' but rather a revaluation and relocation of the literary in multiple media" (Tabbi 28). To this I will add similarly soothing words for the electronic literature community that "~~new media~~ **Accessibility** bodes neither an 'end of ~~books~~ **creative freedom**' nor an 'end of **electronic** literature' but rather a revaluation and relocation of the literary in ~~multiple media~~ **inclusive models**".

Acknowledgements

Rain sound effect by Zapsplash

The video material of the Byderhand work by courtesy of the Byderhand team, filmed by Gustaf Tempelhoff.

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Cite this Essay:

Ackermans, Hannah. "Better with the Sound On; or, The Singularity of Reading and Writing Under Constraint", *Electronic Book Review*, October 3, 2021, .

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This essay was peer-reviewed.