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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Scarcity and Abundance

MARTIN PAUL EVE

One of the clearest reconfigurations wrought by the digital environment is to alter what we perceive of as scarce and what we see as abundant. Why, for instance, consumers around the world might ask, should the pricing of electronic literature supersede those works disseminated in the material codex form? After all, in the digital and electronic space of the Internet, we know that the dissemination costs of material are drastically lowered. We are no longer posting pieces of dead tree around the world for individual readers to own, but instead are building a centralized infrastructure that can, in theory, accommodate all users. In this sense of low distribution costs, we conceive of born-digital literatures as abundant and overflowing, disseminable ad infinitum. However, when such works come into contact with our systems of finance and labor, which are socially scarce (by definition), we then see the restriction as “artificial,” even if, at heart, we know that all our systems of currency *must* be artificially scarce and limited in order to function. Indeed, it may be that *more* labor goes into the creation of many works of electronic literature than in traditional publishing processes. Those who would pirate such materials in order to thwart such scarcity may not have technically “stolen” anything, but they have, as Jaron Lanier (2011: 102) put it, undermined the “artificial scarcities that allow the economy to function.”

In this chapter, I want to suggest that thinking about what is truly abundant and what is actually scarce can help us to broach at least one part of the problem of value that circles around electronic literature. This value problem is, namely, that *time* and *labor* remain scarce in the production and the consumption of electronic literature but also that, in some cases, the points at which the labor of publishing occurs are altered. Indeed, as N. Katherine Hayles notes, asking students to read electronic literature requires up-front signaling from professors about the commensurate time expectations for reading a hypertext. Hayles (2012: 77), for example, specifically tells students that they should spend the same amount of time reading Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995) as they would take to read Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). What usually goes less remarked upon is the fact that the near-elimination of dissemination costs and barriers does not alter the social situation of *work* in the world. It just so happens that the digital environment has shifted the work of publishing and authorship solely to the *labor to first copy*, rather than inhering at equally spaced intervals throughout the process. In other words, the work in publishing of copying and reproducing each text is now extremely minimal compared to the labor of reaching the first copy of that text.

PROPERTY, RIVALRY, AND COMMODITY FETISHISM

The specifically new type of “property” that we see in electronic media is that known as the non-rivalrous object, which originates in thinking about knowledge and ideas. Indeed, figures from Thomas Jefferson to Aaron Swartz have noted that ideas differ from material property in respect of how we vie for them. Jefferson (1853: 180), for example, wrote that “if nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea, which an individual may exclusively possess as long as he keeps it to himself; but the moment it is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of every one, and the receiver cannot dispossess himself of it.” The Internet hacktivist Aaron Swartz (2015: 24), put this Jeffersonian sentiment slightly differently, noting that “by their very nature, ideas *cannot* be property.”¹

Human ideas and knowledge are forms of non-rivalrous objects, so called because once released they can be shared infinitely without a rivalry (a contest) for ownership. You and I can both very well know the “same” things, which differs from the conditions under which I might give you an item of my property. Rivalrous objects are lost when transmitted. Non-rivalrous objects are not. As Peter Suber (2012: 46–7) puts it, though:

For all of human history before the digital age, writing has been rivalrous. Written or recorded knowledge became a material object like stone, clay, skin, or paper, which was necessarily rivalrous. Even when we had the printing press and photocopying machine, allowing us to make many copies at comparatively low cost, each copy was a rivalrous material object. Despite its revolutionary impact, writing was hobbled from birth by this tragic limitation. We could only record nonrivalrous knowledge in a rivalrous form. Digital writing is the first kind of writing that does not reduce recorded knowledge to a rivalrous object.

In other words, there are many forms of extant non-rivalrous objects: knowledge, music, writing, and stories. But so long as these were too complex for most human memories to record or for individuals to reproduce, we have sought to inscribe these forms within rivalrous objects: books, sheets, journals, and records/CDs. Digital media bring with them a property form that seems, at last, to match the transmission of the underlying form with the property mode within which it is recorded; non-rivalrous forms can be disseminated in abundant, non-rivalrous fashions. Copyright is the legal mechanism that we usually use to ensure that others temporarily do not simply profit by duplicating the rivalry of knowledge’s incarnation without having done the work of knowledge production. The problem, however, is that such modes also exacerbate problems of commodity fetishism and neglect the fact that all our existing systems of economics rest upon a scarcity of labor time that is rewarded in currencies that are likewise scarce.

Commodity fetishism was defined by Marx in Volume I of *Capital* (1992). There he writes that

the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves . . . It is [actually] nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic

¹ Emphasis in the original. I am grateful to Mark Carrigan (2016) for pointing out to me this correlation between Swartz and Jefferson.

form of a relation between things . . . I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities. (162)

In other words, commodity fetishism is a way in which we think that reduces objects from relations between people to relations between things. Believing that books that are printed should cost more than those distributed online—even when we know, deep down, that the labor was at least equal in both cases—evinces a commodity fetishism, for such thinking has confused non-rivalry with a false economic and labor abundance, wishing the latter two away.

Yet, it is clear that there are a great number of labor forms that are invested in the creation of e-literatures that differ from conventional publication. For instance, reading the metadata to Emily Short's tale of magical rewriting "First Draft of the Revolution" (2012), it is clear that the work's form is tied directly to a range of types of activity. In the case of "First Draft of the Revolution," the work is free to read and play online, yet we are told that the piece was written by Emily Short and that "design and coding" were undertaken by Liza Daly (2012) and the studio, "inkle" (an independent developer of narrative games and interactive stories). In other words, unlike the traditional publication of literary fiction, for instance, these actors should be considered cocreators, not publishers, since the e-form is clearly key to the work's nature. It is also clear that the work must be hosted on a Web server, which must be secured and maintained. The versions for different reader types must be delivered and kept up to date with any formatting requirement changes. However, the narrative, billed as "novella" in length, is free to "play"/read, unlike some other hypertexts such as the aforementioned *Patchwork Girl* which retails for \$24.99 from Eastgate Systems. For "First Draft of the Revolution," as with many works of electronic literature, one can simply click through and access the piece in its full non-rivalrous glory. Furthermore, in fact, the source code for the underlying book engine is openly licensed under the terms of the BSD License while the story itself is available under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 3.0) license. In other words, "First Draft of the Revolution" is not just available freely to read, it is also openly licensed so that it may be reused.

CREATIVE LABOR AND REMUNERATION

It seems, then, in cases like "First Draft of the Revolution" or other forms of e-literature, such as bots and hypertext stories that take advantage of the non-rivalrous form, that readers often expect them to be monetarily free to access. This comes about, I have implied, because the *distribution* of rivalrous *commodities*—such as physical books—is accepted as requiring payment but the same is not necessarily true in the digital space. The payment for the object form can either be considered for the labor of authors, for publishers, for distributors, and for booksellers or for the commodity itself. The first four of these see the commodity as mediated between people and value labor, whereas the latter (paying for the commodity itself) is a fetish in which the exchange value is elevated. By contrast, in the case of digitally abundant goods we see an abandonment of such precepts. Instead of an appreciation, even within capital, of our relationship to the labor of our fellow human beings, it is tempting to think solely of the end itself, a good which is non-rivalrous and that can be disseminated for nothing. That such goods should be perceived of as free shows that the commodity fetish is distinctly exacerbated in the digital context. What is interesting, though, is that there is a form of labor where the structure of

remuneration is better suited to open dissemination than in the case of e-literature. I am referring, here, to academia.

Academia is, perhaps, the last space where laborers are paid to produce work that they can then “give away.” Many institutions explicitly license their employees to give their work to publishers so that it can be packaged and sold within creditable venues, foregoing their rights to a “work for hire” situation.² In this way, academia can be seen as perhaps the last contemporary stronghold of a system of patronage, a mode that Peter Suber (2012: 10) believes may have emerged in any advanced research ecosystem, since it devolves a form of *academic freedom* to those who work beneath it. This freedom comes about because such researchers are not dependent upon a market to earn a living. Indeed, while it is good that there are subsets of people who wish to read niche research work in almost every case, the numbers are often too low to form a viable market situation. Furthermore, the criterion of novelty distorts the competitive price-setting features of most markets, since it is not possible for a buyer to shop elsewhere. Every piece of research is unique and novel. It is a micro-monopoly.

From this situation of almost-patronage, however, emerges a “freedom from having to sell” for academics. Indeed, academics can pursue research agendas that are esoteric without worrying that they will not eat as a result. Of course, it is hard to secure an academic post and much of academic life is precarious, but being paid on the basis of institutional patronage is a much sounder way to ensure this freedom from populism than any other of which I can conceive. It is this economic foundation that also enables academics to make their work open access (in which research outputs are available at no cost to a reader and may be read, cited, recirculated, and even modified, with attribution), since academics do not need to sell their works to make a living. For, if researchers are secure in their livelihoods, there is no reason why they should not seek the broadest audiences by eliminating price barriers to access research. Indeed, there are many parts of the research ecosystem that encourage such behaviors since open-access research is often more frequently cited than its toll-access counterparts.³ In this system, the way in which academics are paid creates a culture of abundance. The challenge with implementing open access for research is that publishers—whose labor is still required—are remunerated by a very limited kind of market, one primarily consisting of academic libraries. This situation has led to a raft of new business models (the most well known of which is the Article Processing Charge [APC] to be paid by an author’s funder or institution, implemented by many publishers such as Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, and many university presses and as part of the national strategy of the United Kingdom’s open-access provision)⁴ in the attempt to ensure the same freedoms for publishers as is seen by academics with the outcome of freely accessible research material.

Before returning to e-literature, I want just to point to two further intertwined aspects of this academic environment: peer review and publisher gatekeeping. While academics are traditionally free to give away their work, publishers must ensure a degree of selectivity in what they choose to publish, usually using somewhat different measures in the book and journal spaces. For journals, an academic editor will usually work under the jurisdiction of the Committee on Publication Ethics guidelines to commission community consensus as to the standard of the work under a peer-review procedure. For books

² Although see Martin Paul Eve (2014: 43–85) for my critique of why this is problematic.

³ Swan (2010).

⁴ See Tickell (2016).

(monographs, for instance), there is often a preselection phase where market concerns will be addressed by the publishing house. This commercial hedging of bets is because, as John Thompson (2005: 46) has noted,

on the one hand, publishing organizations in these fields [academic books] are concerned with questions of quality and scholarship—indeed, for most university presses these questions are paramount. But publishing organizations are also driven by commercial concerns.

For a publisher's library customers, an academic peer-review procedure acts as a guarantor of quality (regardless of how potentially troublesome such an outsourcing of judgment may be). On the other hand, every publisher would like to be able to gauge the market viability of its outputs, even if such prediction cannot be said to be an exact science. It is at least in part the disjuncture of market freedoms between academics and publishers that has caused so much trouble in the implementation of open access within academia.

What does this market space look like for other creators, though? The economic situation within the academy is uncommon, to be sure. Systems that resemble patronage do not abound through the early twenty-first century, although technological startups such as Patreon are trying to reintroduce the concept. This is indeed a *reintroduction* of patronage since, as Stephen Greenblatt (2012: 85) has noted, authors in earlier periods

made nothing from the sale of their books; their profits derived from the wealthy patron to whom the work was dedicated. (The arrangement—which helps to account for the fulsome flattery of dedicatory epistles—seems odd to us, but it had an impressive stability, remaining in place until the invention of copyright in the 18th century.)

Yet, there are a multitude of labor forms that are roughly analogous to publishing processes in the print world that must be remunerated in the creation of e-literature and that are integral to its success, under a developed system of capital and copyright.⁵ These include roles akin to authorship and narrative creation but also extend into the technological features of typesetting/text encoding, copyediting, proofreading, programming, graphical design, format creation, digital preservation, platform maintenance, forward-migration of content, security design, marketing, social media promotion, implementation of semantic machine-readability, licensing and legal, and the list goes on.

Because of the association of digital abundance with commodity fetishism, we currently struggle to find ways to remunerate such endeavors. Indeed, when presented with a website that one can read and sometimes reuse for no monetary charge, the temptation is to believe that it must have been free to create. At the same time, we know that this statement cannot be the case since the labor forms that we require are scarce and are also tied to a material scarcity of finance and payroll. Just what, then, precisely, is happening here?

PRESTIGE ECONOMIES AND NETWORK EFFECTS

While the most frequent exemplar for economic models in a new digital age is to point to the rapid shifts in the music industry, given that so much of the underpinning labor in the creation of e-literature is technological, I propose here to move to examine the software industries and how these have changed in the light of open-source paradigms. The

⁵ For more on this period of development, see Johns (2011).

canonical example of a new theoretical model is seen in the work of Eric S. Raymond, whose *The Cathedral and the Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source by an Accidental Revolutionary* (2001) remains a core text. Toward the close of his book, one of Raymond's most important frequently asked questions pertains to whether "open-source software [will] leave programmers unable to make a living." Raymond responds that

this seems unlikely—so far, the open-source software industry seems to be creating jobs rather than taking them away. If having a program written is a net economic gain over not having it written, a programmer will get paid whether or not the program is going to be free after it's done. And, no matter how much "free" software gets written, there always seems to be more demand for new and customized applications. (212)

There are two central logical tenets that underpin Raymond's argument here: that free riders are unimportant to those who might pay for free software and that a prestige economy is at work here.

The first of these matters, pertaining to "free riders," is difficult to empirically test over a wide range of areas. Free riders are those individuals within an economic system who benefit without paying. In classical economic models, free riders should be minimized. For instance, it is assumed that those who benefit from infrastructure of the state should pay taxes in order to fund its ongoing development and maintenance. Those who do not pay but nonetheless benefit are free riders and, as in the case of the 2016 Panama Papers leak of tax-avoiders through offshore schemes, are not looked upon favorably. In the case of software, Raymond assumes that those who pay for its development may not mind allowing those who have not paid to access the codebase. In certain situations, this assertion may be true. For instance, Red Hat, Inc. a company that manufactures a distribution of GNU/Linux (an open-source computer operating system) provides a set of support services around the free software. Their business model, in other words, is to provide support, quality assurance, and customization, even while giving away their core software, for which they have paid dedicated staff. Yet, as Peter Levine (2014) points out, it may be that such a type of peripheral service market has a very definite limit to the way it can scale.

Yet, if we step aside from wholly industrial concerns, what counterpart to this "service market" might we see in the production of e-literature? As Gabriella Coleman (2012: 79) puts it, "For Raymond, aligning hacking with the capitalist spirit would allow hackers to accrue socially respectable forms of prestige." It does seem to be in this space where those who write traditional literary fiction with electronic dabbling seem to sit. For instance, David Mitchell's "The Right Sort" (2014b) was tweeted in the summer before the launch of his novel, *The Bone Clocks* (2014a), thereby providing a teaser of the writer's virtuoso voicing in manageable, short form. Likewise, Jennifer Egan published a short story, "Black Box" (2012), via the *New Yorker's* Twitter feed. Egan's text did not obviously tie in with any commercial release, but it is clear that since the *New Yorker* was an official tie-in point for the electronic content, there must have been some arrangement made after the success of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011). Indeed, the organizers of the annual Twitter Fiction Festival at Penguin Random House are keen to stress that those participating "include award-winners and #1 *New York Times*-bestselling writers from a wide variety of genres," including Margaret Atwood, Jackie Collins, and Lemony Snicket, among many others. In such cases, it is unclear to me what the precise motivation for participation might be and whether there was a financial incentive to these top-flying

authors—although Melissa Terras points out that the Oulipo-esque constraint of the form may hold intrinsic aesthetic value for some writers.⁶ Yet, what is eminently clear is that there is a symbolic economy at work here.

In fact, what the Twitter Fiction Festival demonstrates is that its organizers understand how symbolic capital is transferred between participating entities and that it is working on the platform of “exposure” or “amplification” by “association.” For one, the superstar authors appeared alongside twenty-five preselected wildcard entrants, judged by a panel of eminent and respected publishers. In a way, the Twitter Fiction Festival creates the perfect environment for a flow of symbolic capital. New contenders will submit their work because they hope to be judged (and passed) by a market-prediction panel; once in, the wildcard authors who win a final ticket will be placed on the same billing as those who have already had literary-market success in the past. The two market temporalities of future and past success combine to incentivize entrance and to create a prestige economy of exposure/amplification by the association with existing fan-bases of successful authors.⁷ For existing authors, the appeal may lie simply in participating for the good of literature/their own personal fulfillment or it may be that they were asked by their publishers in order to boost their print publications and so forth.

What is also clear, though, is that there is a somewhat exploitative culture of scarcity against abundance at work in e-literature events such as the Twitter Fiction Festival. Namely, those who are scarce are those making money from these activities. For, while entrants will doubtless be abundant, the scarce high-profile advance-laden contracts available to the published relative-few are not a prize on offer. The prize, instead, is exposure and amplification by affiliation, not any finance, even while the event is clearly expected to generate income for the publishing house running it and perhaps even for Twitter, the underlying infrastructure provider that can so easily be accidentally forgotten, through advertising. As Jaron Lanier (2014) frames this type of behavior, what is important is that we see, here, an economy whereby a range of providers position themselves as alluring “siren servers,” crucial nodes on the network with the power to capitalize upon work produced for free within symbolic environments. While prominent voices within the authorial community, such as China Miéville, have called for a state living wage for writers (there is, admittedly, a great deal of detail missing from this proposal in its early stages), at present we are just moving toward a world where those who can capture the network effect, by placing themselves at crucial junctures, can profit, while everyone else fights for the scraps.⁸

READER SCARCITIES AND GAME COMPARABILITY

Thus far, I have primarily focused upon the incongruence between areas of digital abundance and labor scarcity in the realm of the author, mapping the ways by which the scarcity of remuneration and the capture of network effects by a relatively small number of entities constricts—or at least poses challenges to—the production of electronic literature within capital. There is, though, another side to this same theoretical framework: the relative scarcity of reader attention in the digital environment.

⁶ See Goldhill (2015).

⁷ For more on this topic, see English (2005).

⁸ See Higgins (2012).

A good example of this problem of reader time-economy can, once more, be drawn from the academic sphere.⁹ Academics can be recognized in a bookshop for their esoteric behaviors. A normal (i.e., nonacademic) member of the public may approach a work, take it off the shelf and, after examining the front and back covers, begin reading the first few pages to see whether the work is to his or her taste. An academic behaves very differently. He or she will usually head, after the usual cover browsing and table of contents examination, to the *back* of the volume and the citation list/bibliography. The check being performed here is to ascertain whether, first, the perusing academic himself or herself is cited in the work and then to see whether the work cites the expected field. The next check that an academic might make is to examine the index: the alternative topography of the work, again to see what the map looks like. Finally, the academic may turn to the introduction in order to sample the work. What we must understand here, though, is that the professionalization of reading within the academy has yielded different desired outcomes between these two demographics. For the nonacademic reader in the bookshop, the ideal situation is to find a book that triggers interest, that can be purchased and read. For the academic, the opposite is true. The best situation for an academic is to find a work that he or she *does not* need to read. This situation comes about because the time that the academic has for reading is short and the literature is abundant.

As we now know, the digital environment creates abundance. What might not be clear from the above is that the only reason that the nonacademic reader is time rich (and therefore seeking more material) is that the bookshop itself functions as a pre-filtering device. While often relatively abundant, pay-walled bookshops—even digital ones, such as Amazon—have limiting scarcity functions embedded within, such as genre classifications. The academic, of course, also has to contend with a broad field over which he or she must hold mastery. The academic should know of everything (abundance) within a subfield, the nonacademic need not (scarcity). Furthermore, the academic field is one that is structured around constant (re)production of additional research material, whereas the rarefied field of, say, literary fiction is much more tightly bound. In other words, the academic sphere is one of high production, high filtering, high expectation of field mastery, and high digitization of material, even if open access has not yet fully taken off. However, the nonacademic sphere of reading is one of high production, high filtering, but low expectation of field mastery, and, in general, substantially lower digitization. The academic sphere, therefore, has greater demands of reader time and a more abundant culture stemming from its publish or perish culture and strange economic twists that allow the entrance of the digital.

E-literature can create an additional problem in the discoverability space. For what, we might ask, are the quality markers that make it possible to discern where one should direct one's time within the electronic world? Guides, such as those produced by the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) are one such signal. Indeed, the ELO Showcase and Electronic Literature Collection act as signposts of value, while admitting their own non-comprehensivity.¹⁰ However, the fact that the ELO brackets the works in which it is interested under a medium of form—however hard this may be to define¹¹—means that a given piece of electronic literature will only be discovered here by those seeking it through the medium, rather than it being an honest competition with print. In

⁹ An anecdotal situation that I owe to Geoff Bilder.

¹⁰ Electronic Literature Organization (2006a, b).

¹¹ See Levine (2015: 1–23) for an indication of the difficulties here.

other words, only readers who seek “electronic literature” will find electronic literature. Libraries of electronic literature, therefore, build silos that can give some internal assurance/quality markers to electronic literature, but such collections are unlikely to attract mass public attention or provide any kind of external vetting facility that could operate alongside more traditional (and market-dominant) forms, such as print. In truth, though, the vocabulary of electronic literature is strange for purposes of comparison to print literature. Many works, including “First Draft of the Revolution,” ask users to “play” them, rather than “read” them. Of course, the term “play” has many resonances for literary theorists.¹² To my mind though, when confronted with a digital object that asks to be “played,” my thoughts turn more to *games* than to books for any comparison.

When we begin to think of electronic literature alongside games, rather than books, a number of new phenomena become clear. It is, then, rather obvious how traditionalists such as Jonathan Franzen can accuse Twitter fiction of being trivial; it is the age-old narrative that believes that gaming and play must be relegated to childhood and superficiality.¹³ Indeed, though, the ELO’s non-exhaustive list of definitions of e-Lit contains the assertion that “interactive fiction” can be electronic literature. Clearly, we might hope that reading would play some part here, but we could ask to what extent many non-text-based games also count as “interactive fiction”?¹⁴ Are the titles in the ongoing alternative-historical-reality primarily first-person-shooter series, *Wolfenstein* (1981–2016), an “interactive fiction”? Certainly, the titles are fictional and they are interactive. I intuitively sense, though, that any suggestion that these titles vie for the attention of readers of conventional print fiction would fail at all but the broadest levels. For the purposes of discoverability and time competition, then, there is a challenge in the terminology of gaming and play for electronic literature.

Then again, as already mentioned, there is a challenge with the expectation that electronic literature will take the same time to read as conventional works of fiction, for example. N. Katherine Hayles (2012: 85–170) traces this type of expectation to a techno-genetic development. Indeed, the affordances of screen reading are different from those of print. We know, from various replicable eye-tracking studies that readers follow an F-shaped pattern when reading on a screen, which stands in stark contrast to print.¹⁵ In turn, this F-shaped pattern is conducive to quick skimming of works, whereas the more linear tracking seen in print cultures appears better for the conveyance of sustained narrative. Likewise, the hyperlink culture of online works has led to an expectation of quick jumps and nonlinearity within the digital environment. Furthermore, the immateriality of the digital space—despite the overwhelmingly physical and spatial metaphors that we use to describe screen reading of *websites*, *home* pages, and so on—may prove a problem, since, as Anne Mangen (2008) has pointed out, reading is a multisensory activity in which the materiality of the object and readerly haptic feedback alters the experience itself.

In fact, though, among Mangen’s (2008: 405) phenomenological assertions the primary contention is that the experience of interacting with electronic literature takes place at an indeterminate (and indeterminable) distance from the object that is being used/read. The disconnection between text and instrument of its manipulation, such as a computer mouse, also alters the time expectations of readers in the digital world.

¹² Most notably through the Derridean legacy. See Derrida (2006).

¹³ Goldhill (2015).

¹⁴ Electronic Literature Organization (2016).

¹⁵ Nielsen Norman Group (2006).

Because interacting with computers is not a transparent process for all but the most sophisticated of users, who may indeed feel transparently fused with the machine, and because electronic literatures appear to be situated at a distance from these only partially transparent technologies, two time framings are in play across the embodiment relation: the time frame of using the machine and the time frame of engaging with the electronic literature. Both of these time frames are scarce since they are predicated on human life spans; the life time invested in reading. It is their desynchronization, however, that matters; moments such as those when the technology does not behave precisely as a reader might like highlight the media through which the electronic literature is conveyed and stall the reader's progress through the electronic text. Of course, such a phenomenon also exists in the world of the print codex: we have all encountered those situations where we have gone too far by flicking more than one page, disjuncting us from our reading experiences and highlighting the technology of the codex. Because electronic literature is that in which the technological media is integral to the creation, however, when the two time frames of use and comprehension are decoupled, the abundance and scarcity of various timeframes and phenomenological reading experiences are brought to the fore.

THE HAVES AND HAVE NOTS

Whenever we think of publishing, writing, and the reading of literature, it always pays to think in terms of labor, economies, and time scarcities. Electronic literature is no exception to this rule but, for many of the reasons I have outlined in this chapter—spanning its abstract spatiality and immateriality—it is more susceptible to the flaws of commodity fetishism that hide the difficulties of melding abundant digital worlds with scarce labor spaces. This susceptibility can lead us back to situations where, within market economies, it becomes very difficult to see how the labor of writing and programming is to be remunerated when the expectation is free. If one wishes to suggest possible future business-model trends, we could ask whether we might see, in the future, embedded product placement and advertising replacing the purchasing model. Certainly, such advertising has pervaded the computer-gaming world, to which I have suggested that some forms of electronic literature may have an association, even if there is good evidence that such advertising is ineffectual.¹⁶ Conversely, however, we may be at a critical point for the advertising industry. As legal battles rage over “ad blockers” in browsers—battles that publishers are losing it should be noted—many are asking whether an ad-based economy is the right way to support our online services.¹⁷

Yet, I have suggested that the academic world of patronage-like payments might present another space from which we could draw an example of models that might work for open, digital practice. I want to spend this closing section, therefore, discussing a piece of e-literature that merges all the various areas that I have here been discussing across a variety of modes; Johannes Heldén and Håkan Jonson's “Evolution” (2014). “Evolution” is described as an “application” and an “online artwork-in-progress” (not a book or work of e-literature) that “analyzes a database of all the published text- and sound-works by the artist and generates a continuously evolving poem that simulates Heldén's style: in

¹⁶ Kuhn (2008).

¹⁷ Jackson (2016).

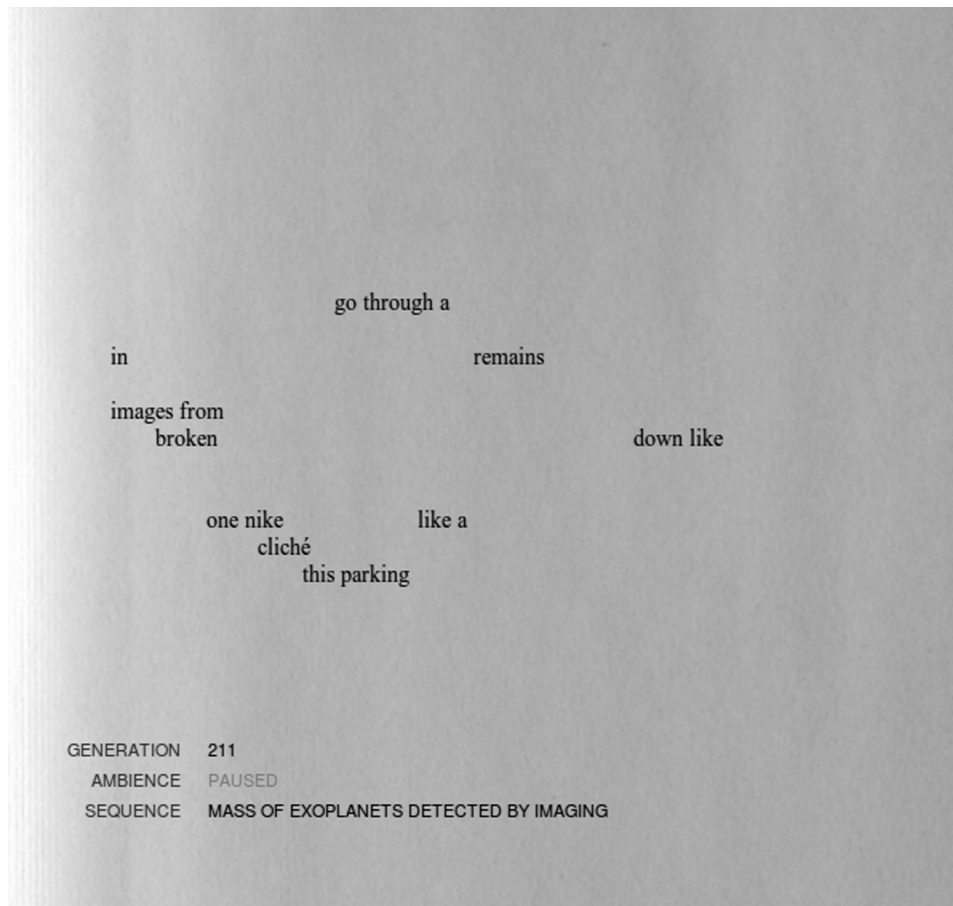


FIGURE 22.1 My playback of *Evolution* at generation 211.

vocabulary, the spacing in-between words, syntax. The audio track is generated by an algorithm that layers the source material of the artist’s compositions in differing randomized lengths, fades and pitch; creating an evolving ambient drone” (ibid.).

Curiously, for genre placement, “Evolution” is assigned an ISBN or an international standard book number (978-91-85905-66-9), which designates it as a book. Yet, nowhere does “Evolution” describe itself as a book and it also has a “play” button with a speed slider that allows one to adjust the rate of generative playback, even if a print copy is available elsewhere. In a sense, then, “Evolution” is more akin to a personal stereo or digital DJ kit in its user interactions than a “book” as we know them. One of the other ways in which “Evolution” interacts with the philosophies of labor, scarcity, and abundance that I have here been outlining can also be seen in its access principles. The work, we are told, was produced with financial support from Kulturbryggan, which is the Arts Grants Committee of Sweden, analogous perhaps to the United Kingdom’s Arts Council or the United States’ National Endowment for the Arts. These organizations are constituted to fund artworks that, in the case of Kulturbryggan, are deemed original, of high quality, competent, feasible, collaborative, and efficient. This grant culture enables “Evolution”

to be disseminated for free online, in an abundant fashion. The reality is, though, that organizations like Kulturbryggan are always short of cash. Such arts organizations can only award a limited number of grants; they are very scarce. From this scarcity we can see the interesting parallel here with academic practice. For the few who can run the gauntlet of the funding stream's scarcity, it becomes possible to disseminate material in a way that is abundant (digitally open).

Such a paradoxical and inward-looking logic of scarcity/abundance is also present within the work itself. For, as "Evolution" cycles through Heldén's body of works, generating its own machine version, among the most important features of the new text are the spacings, seen clearly in Figure 22.1. New text brought forth from the corpus must replace existing generated text, in the logic of "Evolution," or modify the spacings in the new poem to more closely match those found within the corpus work. In such a way, the paths that "Evolution" can follow are abundant. The dynamically generated nature of the program ensures that, while works may be similar, no two runs of "Evolution" will produce the same "found text," even at the same iteration. In this sense, though, of one-timeness, these poems are scarce. They are one-time artifacts, machine-generated literature that is unrepeatable and unique, produced from a code flow that is abundant in its generative pathways, funded by streams of patronage that are scarce, distributed online for free in a mode that is abundant. These, I contend, are the types of paradox of abundance and scarcity that run, usually unspoken, through much of our discussions of electronic literature.

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