

Reading the Fictional Database

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Abstract

In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich argues that database culture would replace narrative. Due to their different ways of organising the world, he viewed the two cultural forms as “natural enemies” (2001, p.225). Whereas a narrative orders events in a cause-and-effect trajectory, a database rejects order in its listing of items and events. In contrast, N. Katherine Hayles proposes that narrative and database can more appropriately be understood as “natural symbionts” (2007, p.1603). She argues that databases create connections between different elements, and narrative is essential to interpret and explain these connections. Contrastingly, to van Alphen, this expected decline of narrative and the increasing prominence of the database at the turn of the millennium triggered “the rise of the archive” (2017) within the art world. In my research of contemporary multimodal literature, I note a similar growing interest in the archive. Yet rather than confirming a decline in narrative, I argue that a sub-genre of multimodal fiction constructs symbiotic narrative and database relationships through multimodal archival poetics.

In this paper, I thus take Manovich’s and Hayles’ views as my starting point to explore database aesthetics in contemporary multimodal and transmedia fiction spanning from page to screen. I analyse Leanne Shapton’s *Important Artifacts* (2009), Aaron A. Reed and Jacob Garbe’s transmedia novel *The Icebound Concordance* (2014), and Sam Barlow’s videogame *Immortality* (2022). To analyse the multimodal database aesthetics of these works and elucidate the reading process, I apply a synthesised multimodal cognitive stylistic approach (Gibbons 2012, Nørgaard 2018) combined with Mason’s interrelation framework (2019).

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Keywords

Multimodal fiction, digital fiction, transmedia narrative, multimodal cognitive stylistics, database

Bio

Dr **Elin Ivansson** is an Associate Lecturer in English at Sheffield Hallam University, UK where she also completed her PhD in 2023. Her book, *Contemporary Archival Fiction: A Multimodal Cognitive Stylistic Approach* (forthcoming) builds on her PhD thesis and presents a synthesised methodology for analysing the reading experience of multimodal archival poetics. Elin has also co-authored a chapter on multimodal archival autofiction in *The Routledge Companion to Literary Media* (Ivansson & Gibbons, 2023) and presented her work at international conferences and workshops.

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