

This is a short paper about my research into the born-digital book *Pathfinders*. The full article with my more detailed methodology and research results is forthcoming.

A Platform's Media Specificity in Context: Follow the *Pathfinders*

Introduction

As scholars and artists in electronic literature, we have a soft spot for 'media specificity', termed by N. Katherine Hayles to refer to the materiality of literary hypertext. Hayles' conception of "media specific analysis" has become a staple in the analysis of digital creative artifacts. She posits to "explore the dynamic interaction between the artifactual characteristics and the interpretation that materiality embodies" (72) in her research on literary hypertexts. But hypertext and other born-digital modes for narrative are no longer just our research subject, they are also our means of communication and publication.

There have been various born-digital journals and platforms that encourage scholars to use multimodal means of academic publication, each with their own media specificity. Many will, for example, be familiar with the journal *Vectors: Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular* (2005-2013). This journal published born-digital scholarship using a myriad of born-digital platforms and forms. Additionally, platforms such as Scalar are specifically developed for humanities scholars to publish in multimedial formats. Born-digital publication, then, offers affordances of multimodality to authors and readers not available in print publication. But how does born-digital publication affect the authorship, circulation, and readership of the work within the academic environment?

My research explores the media-specificity of the, by now canonical, book *Pathfinders: Documenting the Experience of Early Electronic Literature* (2013). In *Pathfinders*, Stuart Moulthrop and Dene Grigar document four classic works of electronic literature using a combination of filmed walkthroughs by authors and readers (known as Traversals), filmed interviews with authors and readers and carefully described and photographed physical materials of the works. The authors go to great lengths to ensure a fidelity to the documented works, by using the original technology that was available when the works were first published. As such, *Pathfinders* is positioned as a DH practice to "rescue" early works of electronic literature from both technological obsolescence and oblivion.

What I wanted to know is how the platform affordances influenced the production, circulation, and readership of the book. And the best way to research *Pathfinders*, was, of course, by hosting some Traversals of my own. On Zoom, I interviewed Dene Grigar about the process of creating *Pathfinders*, and I had three readers of various degrees of experience with electronic literature read the work for the first time. Rather than an isolation of the media-text itself, my contextual approach allows me to reflect on media specificity as implemented within a medial and academic network. From my research, I have distilled four recurring themes: platform adoption, institutional embedding, technological context, and documentation as a research value. In this short paper, I will focus on the general trends in my results rather than giving many citations of the Traversals and interviews.

Platform Adoption

Pathfinders uses the platform Scalar (developed at the University of Southern California), which has various affordances to accommodate multimedial and multilinear research and has been specifically built for humanities publications. Both in prior research from the perspective of digital pedagogy (Tracy, Tracy and Hoiem, Chan and Green) and my reader Traversals show that there is a learning curve to working with Scalar. When first encountering the media pages, for example, the metadata format confuses the readers. But as they keep reading, the repetition of

the structure and formatting helps to ground their experience. Additionally, the Scalar visualization tools represent the pages and media of the book as a graph, which readers found helpful in getting an overview of the contents of the book. The wider use of this particular platform, then, allows both authors and readers to familiarize themselves with a common structure of research and publication. Just because various works are built in Scalar, however, does not mean they all look the same. The users can choose which elements to adopt and appropriate to suit their needs and ideas. To the *Pathfinders* authors, creating a "bookish", "scholarly" publication through the formatting and content was important to situate the book as an academic publication. *Pathfinders* remediates the print book by including subsequently a front page which one could compare with a book cover, then a title page, and then a dedication, before arriving at the introduction. Building on the potential reader's familiarity with print publications, this inclusion of paratext anchors the work as a bookish and scholarly publication. The reader then arrives at the introduction, which already includes various hyperlinks to other media and external webpages as well as an introduction video.

Using any born-digital platform does, however, raise the question of technological obsolescence. Rather than an individual webpage or obscure platform, Scalar was chosen for *Pathfinders* partly due to its relative longevity. Even so, software updates and new releases affect the book now and in the future. This also poses an issue to academic librarians who want to ensure that their acquisitions remain available to readers. In adopting a platform, my librarian reader highlights that in addition to the readership affordances, it is important to consider if it is possible to get the publication down to its basic file form to ensure the multimodal publication can exist after the platform potentially disappears.

The affordances of the platform then, are essential for practical reasons for authors, readers, and librarians. This relates to a larger question of how born-digital publications are regarded within the academic environment.

Institutional Embedding

In academia, publications are a primary way to get to know other people's work, and as such, the institutional embedding is a relevant topic for publications that diverge from established print publication formats. The institutional embedding influences both how authors choose and approach their medial content as well as how the book is circulated and read. The choice of platform as well as the structure and content of the book situate *Pathfinders* within the academic environment. This ranges from the choice of creative works to document to how to situate the documentation in connection to short essays and a literature list for further reading. Readers, then, interpret the work based on prior experiences with both print and born-digital publications. One reader, for example, compared *Pathfinders* to the video essay and reflects on the way video essays have gained reputation within academia. This immediately leads to a reflection on how to cite multimodal publications, as citation has a key social and scholarly function in academia. Another reader brings up that *Pathfinders* contains more information than a print publication would have, but that she is afraid people will take it less seriously because it is a website. This tension between media experience and perceived scholarly authority is arbitrated by other pillars in the institutional environment. Librarians, for example, can play a role in recommending born-digital publications to readers by including them in guides and exhibitions.

Academic publications are created in a network of institutions, including libraries, the authors' institutions, and funding bodies. The funding, as part of the institutional embedding, can influence how work is executed. Here I want to draw attention to its effect on accessibility of born-digital publications. Although there were plans to include closed captions for *Pathfinders'* many audiovisual material, there was not enough funding to do so. This lack of financial support affects the accessibility to Deaf/HOH people, people for whom English is not their first language, as well as people who are new to the field and might not pick up on all the terminology and names in audio format. Including captions would ultimately improve the academic

value of a work. Rather than putting this responsibility on individuals, accessibility should come from a shared sense of accountability in the network of institutions involved.

Technological Context

Similar to institutional embedding, born-digital works also exist within a network of technological context. *Pathfinders* inserts many different platforms, such as Vimeo and SoundCloud, and readers can cross to relevant external websites using the hyperlinks or encounter elements of the work through other channels before entering the book. This inevitably leads to differences in interpretations by different readers and the explicit inclusion of different platforms highlights and invites this practice. The technological ecology, then, extend the book beyond one self-contained text. In the opposite direction, parts of the book can also be encountered outside the context of the book itself, for example because images show up prominently in search engine results.

Whereas the works documented in *Pathfinders* were at risk of technological obsolescence because they were created for particular, now largely outdated, hardware and software, *Pathfinders* itself is created to work on many devices. So much so, that the authors considered that responsiveness of Scalar 2 as a main advantage over Scalar 1. Yet keeping a work alive, the main objective of the *Pathfinders* project, also becomes increasingly urgent with layering and embedded media from different platforms and accounts, as each of the embedded media may become unavailable. The *Pathfinders* book is, then, best understood through Andersen and Pold's concept of the "metainterface", which theorizes the current paradigm in which we can no longer speak of one interface but rather a layered interface of both visible elements in any webpage and communication between devices. The embedded fidelity in the layered interface of *Pathfinders* creates a new type of source for reading electronic literature that provides a rich context for historical works utilizing the contemporary characteristics of the metainterface.

Regarding the video Traversals as preservation assumes the videos have a certain status as a source. The creative works have been filmed with the original hardware and software, but all readers of *Pathfinders* will see these works on their contemporary devices. This fits within the larger conversation in the field of electronic literature in which documentation of works becomes a primary source when works become unavailable. Of course, despite their "rescue mission", the *Pathfinders* authors do not claim that the creative works can be replaced by the Traversals, but rather make parts of the works more accessible and ideally draw more people to the original works. Through the variation in media, *Pathfinders* combines the clarity and systemic approach of a database with a cacophony of voices that give a mosaic impression of the works.

Documentation as a Research Value

Multimodal works can also use their structure to foreground arguments and values. *Pathfinders* uses its multimedia of videos and images to create situational and networked documentation. Rather than thinking of documentation as preparatory work, this objective to rescue works foregrounds the value of documentation and presentation of sources as research in itself. Highlighting the process of documentation, the *Pathfinders* authors intentionally include the technological reality of the work by not hiding cables and such from the video recordings. The videos, then, are a demonstration of the research process as well. Additionally, many of the videos include conversational interviews in which the interviewers and interviewees bring up anecdotes of the early electronic literature community. Readers have varying responses to these videos, seen as either superfluous or highly relevant to the larger contextualization of the works. This spontaneity in the interviews and the reader experience in the Traversals show situatedness as integral parts to the documentation of creative works. In *Pathfinders*, foregrounding the documentation process as a research value provides potential counternarratives to the history of electronic literature by showing what might have been left out in other publications.

The Traversal practice has also become a pillar of its own beyond the *Pathfinders* book. The Traversal practice combined with interviews has been developed further in the born-digital book series *Rebooting Electronic Literature: Documenting Pre-Web Digital Media*, by Dene Grigar et al on Scalar. The practice has also transformed into live Traversals during various conferences with an audience present. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the practice has turned digital, with public Traversals on Zoom in which anyone can join in the audience. Overall, the practice now includes characterizing social and performative aspects that foreground the documentation process as an important research value.

This documentation approach is picked up by the readers. They refer to *Pathfinders* as "a database" and "a hub". The librarian reader also brings up how this type of publication attempts to visualize the basic presumption in many humanities studies of the cultural object that functions within a network of relationships. These parallels in understanding the *Pathfinders* project reflect the main value of documentation, the storing of a relevant information across various media.

Concluding remarks

Publishing academic work on born-digital platforms does not simply (re)produce what could have been written on paper. Rather, the media specificity of works influences the production, text, and readership. As I have demonstrated, media specificity of academic publications is not simply the characteristics of the medium, but rather deeply tied to use of platforms, the institutional embedding, the technological ecology, and the promotion of research values.

While media specific analysis has become common place in various studies of creative digital artifacts, analysis of born-digital academic publications could enhance the understanding of these particular texts as well as contribute to a more intricate application of media specificity. Academia in particular has explicit and implicit customs of creating cultural capital in producing and circulating knowledge. As publication is a primary and principal mode through which scholars get to know each

other's works and build their field, scrutiny of their medial mode is necessary to understand the field.

References

Andersen, Christian Ulrik, and Søren Bro Pold. *The Metainterface: The Art of Platforms, Cities, and Clouds*. MIT Press, 2018.

Chan, Anita, and Harriett E. Green. "Practicing Collaborative Digital Pedagogy to Foster Digital Literacies in Humanities Classrooms." *Educause Review* (2014).

Grigar, Dene M., and Stuart A. Moulthrop. *Pathfinders: Documenting the Experience of Early Digital Literature*. Nospace Press, 2015.

<https://scalar.usc.edu/works/pathfinders/index>

Hayles, N. Katherine. "Print is Flat, Code is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis." *Poetics Today* 25.1 (2004): 67-90.

Tracy, Daniel G. "Assessing Digital Humanities Tools: Use of Scalar at a Research University." *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 16.1 (2016): 163-189.

Tracy, Daniel G., and Elizabeth Massa Hoiem. "Teaching Digital Humanities Tools at a Distance: A Librarian-Instructor Partnership Integrating Scalar into a Graduate Distance Course." (2017).