

On Smith Street
and
Short Stories in the
Digi-Social World
Lynette Washington

A short story collection and exegesis
submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing
Discipline of English and Creative Writing
School of Humanities
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Volume 2:
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Abstract

The notion that digital publishing has altered the way we read is one that is being increasingly studied. Less attention has been paid to whether digital publishing has changed the way writers *write*.

As a short story writer I am most interested in this form and whether it is being impacted by the digitisation of our reading and writing practices. The short story as a form has constantly undergone change. It is malleable and adaptable and goes through periods of popularity and periods where it is ignored or scorned. Recently, there has been speculation that short stories are suited to the digital age.

In this exegesis I attempt to understand the role of the short story in the current writing and publishing climate by asking the following questions: is the short story changing with increasing digitisation of writing and reading spaces? What does digimodernism tell us about writing and reading in the current climate? And, how did experimenting with digital writing and researching experimental print forms impact my own print-based practice?

When I began writing the creative work, it was with a simple goal: to write good stories. As I researched and wrote deeper into the project it became increasingly important to understand my own relationship with digital publishing. My stories seemed to suit the page, even though I was challenging myself to experiment with the digital form. The stories in *On Smith Street* began life as disconnected, independent entities. Each story was written to explore an idea that resonated with me as a writer. Towards the end of the project, it became clear to me that presenting the stories within a structure made them stronger. From this, the idea of connecting the stories by the geographical location of the characters (Smith Street) eventually emerged. This then allowed me to look more deeply at the characters and

find themes and ways to connect them. Links between characters began to emerge without effort: they were already there. These links then allowed me to provide the reader with pathways through the narrative that are at once unconventional and conventional.

The writing process was in part informed by digital technology and digital storytelling, but the resultant story collection is firmly entrenched in print conventions. In examining what writers were doing online, I discovered that my writer 'home' was on the page, rather than the screen. But by swinging my writer's pendulum into the digital world, I was able to bring ideas from there onto my page. The stories are influenced by this oscillation between the screen and the page.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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In the case of *On Smith Street*, there will be a 3 year embargo.

Lynette Washington

April 2016

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MidnightSun Publishing will be publishing the *On Smith Street* stories in a collection in 2017. To the Publisher, Anna Solding, thank you so much for your support, friendship, encouragement and belief. It means the world to me that you are publishing my stories and I am thrilled to be part of the MidnightSun family.

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Firstly to Mark for not batting an eyelid when I said, quite out of the blue, that I wanted to take on this monumental and some would say crazy task. I have

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Last, but not least, I would like to dedicate this thesis to mediocre students everywhere. As a primary and secondary student I produced average results across the board. My teachers often commented on my studiousness, but never my ability or talent. This led me to the certain conclusion at the age of seventeen that I would never be any good at English, and destroyed my confidence in my ability to pursue the only dream I ever had: to be a writer. It took approaching middle age for me to decide to ignore those mediocre grades and pursue a writing career. It is now my passionate belief that mediocre abilities coupled with dedication, discipline, hard work and desire produce excellent results.

Introduction

I began writing the creative component of my thesis in 2011 with the idea that digital publishing was changing the way we read. At that time, and since then, academic journals, bloggers and news websites were publishing stories about how the internet was changing reading (Hayles, Coker, Lui, Hulburt and Voas, Alizadeh, Indyk, Senior, Pearse, Reuters, Kirschenbaum). Some commentators noticed that this new way of reading suited the short story, or a different type of storytelling altogether (Liebling, Norrington, Houston, Harris, Flood). It seemed possible that we were approaching a revival of my favourite form of fiction, and it seemed that this emerging academic and anecdotal evidence warranted further interrogation.

Over the course of the years it took to write my short story collection for the creative component of the thesis, I noticed there was a shift in this type of reporting. Rosenwald's article 'Why digital natives prefer reading in print. Yes, you read that right.' is indicative of the changing tone. In it Rosenwald argues that digital natives are turning their backs on screen-based reading. Students are recognising the value and importance of reading on the page and are happy to turn their screens off for a while and return to the page to balance out, or reduce, their screen time. Stories about the renaissance of the short story were still there but perhaps the tone was changing.

The grand idea I began with was evolving into an emerging reality, and that reality suggested that while digital was the future, print was not going away. The speed with which reporting went from 'the death of the book' to 'digital natives prefer print' is a testament to the speed at which everything changes in the online world. Despite this shift in tone, websites that published short stories and flash fiction were springing up (for example, *East of the Web*, *Smokelong Quarterly* and *Fish Publishing*) and curated sites for excellence in digital storytelling were

emerging (for example the *Electronic Literature Collection*). It seemed that the web was providing a new platform for short stories.

I kept an interested eye on all these happenings as I wrote my stories, and an idea slowly formed: the internet was changing the way we *write*, not just the way we *read*. When this idea came to me it seemed blindingly obvious. *Of course* we write differently for the screen than the printed page. These were the lessons I had learned as a technical writer who had written countless business documents for both the screen and the page for the past fifteen years. Through the experience of writing these documents I learned that the principles of writing for the online audience are different: you cannot assume your reader has read the preceding section and therefore has that knowledge; you must use copious dot points to break information up into small bites because people *scan* online, they do not *read*; never write more than can fit on two screens (and preferably not more than one screen); include hypertext links to relevant information; only write something once so that you do not have to make multiple changes when that process changes.

This led me to a period of experimentation in my creative writing. I investigated some of the ways people write for the web. Hypertext stories, flash fiction and interactive fiction stories emerged as trends. Of course ebooks are read on the screen, but at this stage they have yet to develop into anything more than a print book on a screen – at the time of writing there is no innovative technology being employed that might make the *writing* experience any different to that of writing a print book: typically ebooks are written for the page, and published as ebooks incidentally.

In bringing the tools and methods of writing hypertext stories, flash fiction and interactive fiction stories into my work, I quickly discovered that I did not actually *want* to write specifically for a digital space. It required an element of visual

storytelling that I was uncomfortable with. Visual and web-based stories such as *Inanimate Alice* were leading the way in digital storytelling and their value was obvious to me, but this was not where my writers' heart lay. It lay with words, not images.

Flash fiction was ultimately more satisfying. A definition of flash fiction is notoriously hard to pin down, with parameters ranging from 50 words to 1000 words. James Thomas coined the phrase 'flash fiction' in his 1992 collection, in which he limited stories to 750 words, citing Hemingway's 'A Very Short Story' (which is about 750 words) as inspiration (11). In her introduction to *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction*, Masih writes:

To offer a more complete, hard-edged definition is virtually impossible. Outside of a page or word count (roughly 1-3 pages and 250-1,000 words), the definitions offered by experts can leave a writer unsure of how to characterize flash. To say that a flash must contain all the literary elements that a longer story does—plot, setting, character, conflict, narration—would be argued against by the proponents of experimental flash who lean more toward slice-of-life sketches. In the end a flash is simply a story in miniature, a work of art carved on a grain of rice.
X1

The idea that a story could be told in the tiniest of spaces suited my writing style and the way my creative ideas worked. Flash fiction felt like a comfortable fit, but flash fiction is not inexorably connected with the internet. It began as a print form and still functions well in print form.

Hypertext stories were briefly fascinating. But what is hypertext?

The simplest way to define hypertext is to contrast it with traditional text like this book. All traditional text, whether in printed form or in computer files, is *sequential*, meaning that there is a single linear sequence defining the

order in which the text is to be read. First you read page one. Then you read page two. Then you read page three...Hypertext is *nonsequential*; there is no single order that determines the sequence in which the text is to be read.

Nielsen 1

I tried writing hypertext stories, and found this to be difficult, frustrating and completely different to writing for the page. The idea that, much like the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books of my childhood, a reader could be given options and decide where the story goes, was initially enticing. But during my process of experimentation the idea of making decisions as a reader lost its appeal. It began to feel like a gimmick, and I came to understand that much of the appeal of reading a story is in being *taken* somewhere, in *not* having to make choices. I wanted to know the scope of what I read (how many pages was it? How long would it take to read a chapter or story? When could I expect a turning point, a climax, a resolution?). And I wanted to be guided. I did not want to have to make decisions for the characters. It felt like that was the authors' job. My job, as a reader, was to be guided – and I use the term guided rather than led, because it recognises that the reader is still involved in meaning-making. While the reader must always be a part of making meaning from a text, it is clear that the author makes meaning too. That is the contract between reader and writer – both are involved, and there is a delicate balance which dictates how much each participant must create. For my personal tastes, hypertext fiction tips the balance too far in favour of the reader.

All of these experiments led me back to where I started, it seemed. Back to writing short stories that were suitable to a print format. The only change, perhaps, was that I felt my short-short stories were validated with the knowledge that flash

fiction was a genuine literary genre and not just a short cut, or a half-baked short story.

Had all this experimentation been for nothing? No. While I was certainly not writing hypertext fiction, I *was* writing stories that were connected in interesting ways. I was writing a collection of short stories that could be read: as a conventional book, from cover to cover; as a standalone novella; as a novella within the context of surrounding stories, or; in blocks of stories driven by particular characters. My writing had been informed by digital writing styles, but I always told the reader where to go and how things ended – the reader could choose a path through the stories, or be guided through the stories a conventional way, but they would always reach the same denouement. Their decisions as a reader would not change the outcome or the story, only their individual reading experience. And while reading the stories as a whole or in parts would undoubtedly change the reader's experience, and probably also change their interpretation of the whole, the denouement was predetermined, by me.

This seemed to open up a new question: is the internet's impact more broad-reaching than just the online world; is the internet changing the way we write for print too? And what does cultural theory have to say about these changes?

Part 1: The Changing Short Story

Pictorial histories on cave and other dwelling walls constitute the earliest forms of preserved prehuman and early-human communications...Ironically, we're not that much different today, except our walls are more likely to be on Facebook than deep inside canyons or dark caves.
Hurlburt and Voas 4

Storytelling is a fluid art form: from early oral traditions to online writing, with many stages and innovations in between, storytelling has adapted to its environment and its political, social, cultural and technological surroundings. However, as Hurlburt and Voas allude to, while some things change, others remain the same. Our need for story is unflinching, unchanged by even the evolution of the species from prehuman to early-human, and while the medium changes, our need for story itself is constant. Kelly Czarnecki agrees, 'the core of storytelling – simply telling a good story – hasn't changed much since its prehistoric origins' (6).

In this chapter I provide a brief outline of the development of English literature and the short story, followed by a detailed look at contemporary storytelling innovations so as to illustrate the short story form's flexibility and ability to adapt to its cultural surroundings and the implications of this for short story writers.

The short story in English literature

In order to illustrate how digitisation is changing the contemporary short story, I will first quote Terry Eagleton on the idea that literature has changed over time, and then consider Ian Reid's arguments on how the short story has changed. Both these discussions are intended to show that literature in general and short stories in

particular are malleable and changeable and are influenced by factors such as culture and technology. Eagleton identifies that in early eighteenth-century England the concept of literature was 'value-laden' (*Literary Theory* 17): the criterion for literature was that it could embody the values of a particular social class. Philosophy, history, letters and poetry were all considered literature as long as they reflected appropriate values. This changed through the Romantic period, when literature was identified as creative or imaginative work, and 'to write about what did not exist was somehow more soul-stirring and valuable than to pen an account of Birmingham or the circulation of blood' (18). Eagleton connects this period of 'brutal political repressiveness' where England was effectively a 'police state' (19) with the beginnings of literature as a tool of subversion. The role of literature during this time was more than simple escapism:

The word 'poetry', then, no longer refers simply to a technical mode of writing: it has deep social, political and philosophical implications, and at the sound of it the ruling class might quite literally reach for its gun. Literature has become...a political force. Its task is to transform society in the name of those energies and values which art embodies.
Eagleton *Literary Theory* 20

Eagleton observes further changes throughout the nineteenth century, this time related to the demise of the church. The ideology that had shaped the masses was failing; science was questioning religion, and George Gordon, early Professor of English Literature at Oxford remarked:

England is sick, and...English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature now has a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State.
Eagleton *Literary Theory* 23

The twentieth century saw further changes, brought about largely by World War I. During this time the cultural identity of the English ruling class was profoundly questioned; ideas about women's roles and class structure were shaken, and literature, such as the poetry of Wilfred Owen, provided solace after the despair of the war. Literature was again realigned, this time given a place in elite universities, and no longer considered something for 'women and workers and those wishing to impress the natives' (29-30). Eagleton's examination of these changes is in depth, but the idea that literature is not static has been expressed elsewhere with brevity:

Literacy conjured printing, which invented copyright,
which invented the author, who in turn invented the reader
and silent contemplation, which killed orality.
Weldon n.pag.

The short story developed along its own unique path. Ian Reid maps the genre from ancient Egypt where stories, unlike those from the Bible, were 'told for their intrinsic value as entertainment' (15) and are thought to be the earliest surviving examples of the written short story. Reid plots various developments from the medieval period, where short prose was uncommon unless it served a devotional or instructional purpose (18-19); to Boccaccio's early subversions of language and genre in the 1300s (19-20); to the flourishing *Novelle* in the early nineteenth century Germany; to France, where the 'art of the short story was firmly established in 1829-31 with the magazine publication of a dozen *contes* by Mérimée, Balzac and Gautier' (23-24). In France at this time the short story was deemed 'especially suitable for the portrayal of regional life, or of individuals who, though situated in a city, lived there as aliens' (24). At this time, novels were used to 'delineate those large-scale social patterns which were so amply extended in urban life' (24), but it was left to the short story to illuminate the life of 'aliens' and 'country folk'. Perhaps this is the beginning of the

short story's fascination with the disenfranchised, the disconnected, the unrepresented.

During this same timeframe in Russia, Pushkin was writing short stories that 'brought bareness and concision...all padding is removed' (24). Gogol too was 'stripping narrative prose of fuzzy embellishment' while writing about 'ordinary people, apparent nonentities' (24). It is Reid's belief that the short story's ability to tackle subject matter that is otherwise ignored can be seen in the way they often focus on individuals who are beyond accepted society in some way, the outcast and loner. He says:

Short stories do frequently focus on one or two individuals who are seen as separated from their fellow-men in some way, at odds with social norms, beyond the pale.

27

The short story was a popular form in North America in the nineteenth century too with Washington Irving, Edgar Allen Poe and others writing in a style that was characterised by its 'detachment from normal social behaviour, and tendency towards allegory' (25).

The fact that the story was developing quite uniquely across countries and continents during the 1800s is an indicator of its flexibility as a genre and its ability to adapt to the social conditions in which its writers found themselves. There is a distinct trend amongst all these developing story traditions: a focus on the stories of people who might be otherwise voiceless or disenfranchised (Reid).

The definition of and criteria for short stories are notoriously hard to pin down, as was shown previously with a subset of short stories, flash fiction (Masih). For Reid, though, the short story is essentially 'a Romantic form: *the* Romantic prose

form' (28). Baldick defines romanticism as:

A sweeping but indispensable modern term applied to the profound shift in Western attitudes to art and human creativity that dominated much of European culture in the first half of the 19th century, and that has shaped most subsequent developments in literature—even those reacting against it...Its chief emphasis was upon freedom of individual self-expression: sincerity, spontaneity, and originality became the new standards in literature.
294

In referring to short stories as an essentially Romantic form, Reid states that they are populated with 'wanderers, lonely dreamers, and outcast or scapegoat figures' (27). He equates the story's brevity with that of the lyric poem, a form that is connected with the Romantic period. He recognises that both stories and poems concentrate on 'some significant moment, some instant of perception...[the] inward meaning of a crucial event' (28).

That the thrust of Romanticism was one of the main forces propelling the nineteenth-century short story into the salient position it came to occupy is undeniable, as is the fact that the genre has continued in the main to exhibit 'Romantic' attitudes...
Reid 28

In Chapter 2, I will return to the idea that the short story has held onto Romantic notions, despite the changes to texts of modernism and postmodernism.

The short story has proved remarkably adaptable. However, the societal conditions that Reid explored that pushed literature to innovations are different today. Wars are still being fought, political oppression and injustice still exists. However, there are conditions that exist today that did not exist 100 or even 50 years ago. In affluent, developed countries digital technology surrounds us and is

ubiquitous. ‘Ubiquitous computing’ refers to the idea that there is a new kind of computing technology where ‘the computing power resides not only in the computers with which we are all familiar, but also in everyday, familiar devices not usually thought of as computing’ (Hongladarom 2012).

There is an explosion in the number of devices that use processors, software and connections to mobile networks, so that computers will soon be everywhere without being noticed or acknowledged. Analyst IDC has predicted that by 2020 there will be more than 3.1 billion connected devices in the world, generating global revenues of \$8.9 trillion.

Say 22

Eagleton’s argument that literature changes with societal changes holds true for today – literature is not a static, immovable, unchangeable canon. It is worthwhile examining whether computing and digital publishing will change our use of and views on literature. Just as ‘literary studies expanded its purview in the 1970s and 1980s [and] turned to reading many different kinds of “texts,” from Donald Duck to fashion clothing, television programs to prison architecture’ (Hayles 63), there is now a new opportunity to turn to reading digital texts in the age of computer ubiquity. And just as reading fashion clothing or television programs required a different skill set and language, reading and writing digital texts requires a different skill set and language. Hayles (referencing Sosnoski) identifies ‘hyperreading’ as a way of reading that involves different skills to those required for print reading, and states that hyperreading ‘stimulates different brain functions than print reading’ (66). Some of these skills include: writing search queries, filtering by keywords, skimming, hyperlinking, pecking, fragmenting and juxtaposing (the latter being Hayles’ addition to Sosnoski’s original work) (66). In other words, there are skills

required for digital literacy that are not required for print literacy and in order to understand the value of a digital text, one first must have a degree of digital literacy from which to judge it.

Journals such as the online *Meanland* (a collaboration between print journals *Meanjin* and *Overland*) set out to investigate reading in an age of change. Jeff Sparrow wrote this about the fledging project:

The project, entitled ‘Reading in an Age of Change’ (or more informally, and inevitably, ‘Meanland’) will be a constructive dialogue about how future generations will read. Meanland will provide a reflection on (and an intervention into) the changing nature of reading, writing and publishing. It will explore the challenges facing literary culture in the twenty-first century – from Kindles to copyright, from the economics of globalisation to changing ways of understanding text.
Sparrow n.pag.

Articles that followed had titles such as these: ‘For and against a digital avant-garde’, ‘The obscure object of e-reading desire’, ‘The internet: friend or foe to the small magazine’, ‘The death of the book, and other utopian fantasies’ (all by Ali Alizadeh).

Trade journals are also paying attention, with articles such as ‘Publishing Venture Bets on iPhone Short Stories’ (Reuters) and ‘Publishing Prospers from Digital Threat’ (*New Media Age*) giving an indication of the direction this reporting is taking. Newspapers are following suit with headlines such as ‘Has China found the future of publishing?’ (*The Guardian*). It is a popular topic in the blogosphere, and academia is also investigating these ideas. In 2009 Petrelli and Wright mapped the contemporary digital writing landscape. I will return to this study as it provides interesting perspectives and a broad brush summary of trends in digital publishing, in

particular their finding that ‘Readers seem uneasy with the role of co-creators that writers want to assign them and prefer linear stories to more deconstructed ones’ (509).

Reading in the digital landscape

Literature does not exist in a bubble. Other cultural artefacts are produced side-by-side with books and in some cases can illuminate broader study. On occasion a song, for example, might bring to light an issue that is of interest to writers of fiction. For example, in 1992 a popular song, ‘Television, the Drug of the Nation’ (*The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy*), had significant chart success. The song tapped into a hysteria that still existed about television – a technology that had been the dominant form of mass media in America since the 1950s (Diggs-Brown 53). In the media age we are in now, television is becoming a subordinate media form. The internet is becoming, if it is not already, the primary media resource in the Western world. Pavlik and McIntosh show the number of years various media forms have taken to reach 50% penetration of US households. It shows that it took newspapers 100 years, for example, 15 years for colour TV and just 7 for the internet.

TECHNOLOGY/MEDIUM	YEARS
Newspapers	100+
Telephone	70
Phonograph	55
Cable Television	39
Personal Computer	19
Color Television	15
VCR	10
Radio	9
Black and White Television	8
Internet/World Wide Web	7

Figure 1: Years taken for media form to reach 50% penetration of US households (Pavlik and MacIntosh 7)

Another take on the ubiquity of the internet is this:



Figure 2: Gary Hayes 'The Count' Personalize Media

(Screenshot taken on 11th August, 2015.)

Updated several times per second, this table has been shared over 56,300 times as at August 2015 and shows activity on the internet. This table demonstrates an astounding level of engagement with internet-based media and journalists are reporting on digital engagement in a way that suggest a level of panic. Headlines such as these are commonplace:

- ‘Switched on world is killing creativity, expert warns’ *The News*, 2011
- ‘Poetry’s death by a thousand hits’ *The Weekend Australian*, 2011
- ‘Nobody wants to read, but everyone wants to write’ *Crikey*, 2011
- ‘Fiercely defending print books in the wake of digital uprising’ *Publishing Paranoia*, 2011
- ‘Publishers are braced for the slow death of the book’ *The Times* (UK), 2008

As these articles show, panic about the internet takes different forms, but the fear of the death of reading, at least, appears unfounded. We are reading more than ever – as Figure 3 shows.

Changes	Time Spent Reading	Time spent reading electronic documents
More time	67.30%	83.20%
Less time	0%	10.60%
No change	31.90%	0.90%
Don’t know	0.90%	5.30%

Figure 3: ‘Time Spent on Reading’

(Liu 705)

The largest increase in reading (83.20%) is in time spent reading electronic documents, but there is also a significant increase in the amount of time spent reading in general.

Mangen says, 'Theorists across disciplinary boundaries largely agree that we read differently when reading digital texts, compared with when reading print' (404). My experience as a technical writer writing for the page and screen taught me that because we read differently on the screen, we write differently for the screen. What does this mean for the short story? There are many headlines, such as these that espouse the idea that short stories and digital publishing are a natural fit:

'Publishing venture bets on iPhone Short Stories' *PC Mag*, 2010

'Publisher Ether Books gives short stories new lease on life on an iPhone' *The Guardian*, 2010

It would seem that there is interest in reading and publishing short stories for mobile devices, but research indicates that people read differently on the screen. Liu's findings match my own experiences in writing for digital readers:

Screen-based reading behaviour is characterized by more time spent on browsing and scanning, keyword spotting, one-time reading, non-linear reading, and reading more selectively, while less time is spent on in-depth reading, and concentrated reading. Decreasing sustained attention is also noted.

Liu 700

Liu claims that reading online is less immersive because we are scanning and therefore not thinking deeply, and that our attention span is reduced. Mangen seems to agree:

The sensory–motor affordances of the computer make it very easy to rekindle our attention, getting access to something beyond our present experience. As such, text or icons that yield (i.e., hot spots) afford haptic interaction with the computer. We experience these as links to be clicked on, and such affordance is necessarily incompatible with phenomenological immersion.
n.pag.

However, Kirschenbaum makes the point that a study that examined the quantity and quality of reading (the National Endowment for the Arts report, ‘To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence’ in 2007) was ‘curiously devoid of historical awareness, as though there is but a single, idealized model of reading from which we have strayed’. Kirschenbaum infers that there is not one single way (e.g. immersion) with which to judge the value of reading. Hayles provides a perhaps more balanced view that readers need to develop new skills in digital literacy while retaining their classic literacy skills of close reading (2012). This idea is an acknowledgement that readers need to continue to work towards immersion, while recognising other intrinsic values in digital texts.

What do these digital reading styles (for example scanning, browsing, keyword-spotting, non-linear reading) mean for short stories? Certainly it would seem that if readers have decreased attention spans, they might choose to read shorter fiction. But there is a lot more to online reading than brevity and short attention spans, and this idea itself has yet to be definitively proven. According to Prensky, digital natives (those born into a world with ubiquitous computing) do not have short attention spans – unless they are disinterested in what they are doing (4). Brain plasticity was once thought to end at about age three, but neurobiology research has shown that the brain remains plastic throughout life (1). This generation, raised on the internet, has rewired its brain for *non-linear, hypertext thinking* (3).

There appears to be a clear distinction between the digital natives who crave the non-linear practices that Prensky identifies, and the subjects in Petrelli and Wright's study (all either writers, publishers or readers) who, despite their digital engagement, found non-linear reading practices in an online environment uncomfortable and problematic. The relationship with digital reading that Petrelli and Wright uncovered is more nuanced and problematic than might be expected, based on Prensky's assertions. It is possible that the participants in Petrelli and Wright's study fit into the non-digital native (i.e. digital immigrant) category, but this is only a supposition as the study does not identify its participants by age or digital native/immigrant status. However, what is clear in comparing these two perspectives is that there is variation in how digital writing and reading is perceived in the current climate. What then does this mean for readers and writers in the digital age? In the next section I will examine some of the ways writers are engaging with the digital environment.

What is the role of the digital author?

In 2016 authors are part of a world that is not limited to an ivory tower and a typewriter. Whether they like it or not, they and their work exists in a world that includes the digital sphere. The author has the option of engaging with that sphere, or working in a way that is disengaged from it. As an author, I have chosen to engage with the digital sphere and this has led me to examine the ways it is now possible to write and publish. In this section I consider some of the ways it is possible to be a digital author and investigate some of the tools I used to engage with the digital (which I then expand on in Chapter 3 when I discuss the precise nature of my own experimentation).

The digital sphere has created a new level of interaction between author and reader and has blurred the lines between the two much further than previously: this mashing up of the roles of writer and reader is one of the key elements of online writing. Bruns argues that the prosumer concept developed by in Toffler in the 1970s, 80s and 90s is no longer useful, and that:

In the user communities participating in such forms of content creation, roles as consumers and users have long begun to be inextricably interwoven with those as producer and creator: users are always already also able to be producers of the shared information collection, regardless of whether they are aware of that fact – they have taken on a new, hybrid role which may be best described as that of a produser.

From Prosumer to Produser n.pag.

Further Bruns claims that,

What emerges is that in the online, networked, information economy, participants are not simply passive consumers, but active users, with some of them participating more strongly with a focus only on their own personal use, some of them participating more strongly in ways which are inherently constructive and productive of social networks and community content.

Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond 223

The characteristics of these produsers are summarised as:

- Open participation, communal evaluation
- Fluid heterarchy, *ad hoc* meritocracy
- Unfinished artefacts, continuing process
- Common property, individual rewards

Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond 224-230

In order to understand this further, I will examine three types of online storytelling which I investigated in my own writing practices: interactive fiction, hypertext

fiction and flash fiction. Small subcultures such as the world of interactive fiction (IF), where computers, writers and readers interact to create stories, coexist alongside their economically-driven distant cousins in the mainstream publishing industry and take steps to remain on the outskirts of mainstream culture. Interactive fiction is described as:

...a category that is typically represented by the text adventure or text game, has literary, gaming, and other important aspects.
Montfort 'Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction' 26

In this world, says Montfort, 'the reason most interactive fiction is created is to *amuse the initiated*' (*Twisty Little Passages*, 229, Montfort's emphasis). But not only are the creators of IF trying to keep their audience small by only seeking to amuse those already initiated into the subculture, they are also seeking to keep it safe from a potentially destructive outside world:

...there are many people in the IF community who...see that a wider popularity and interest from other sectors (commercial or academic) risks dissolving or weakening the current community.
Monfort 230

In this subculture, authors are not visible in the way that traditionally published authors are, at least in part because the IF world is non-commercial (Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages*). These authors do not sit on television chat shows or behind desks in radio studios talking to DJs or on panels at writers' festivals. Additionally, the author is only ever a co-creator of the work. The author writes the story, possibly with a graphic designer and a programmer. The reader uses text commands to move through possible plot progressions. The computer responds to reader input by generating

story elements based on programming. In this world, the author shares credit with a machine, programmer, designer and the reader.

Whether this constitutes ‘literature’ or even ‘writing’, or whether it is simply a text-based game is debatable. It is out of the scope of this exegesis to argue that point, but, I would argue that the users of IF consider that they are engaged in story, and that in and of itself should be taken into account. As an example, I would like to briefly consider the IF game, *Judith* (Cavanagh and Lavelle) on the East of the Web website. *Judith* looks like this:

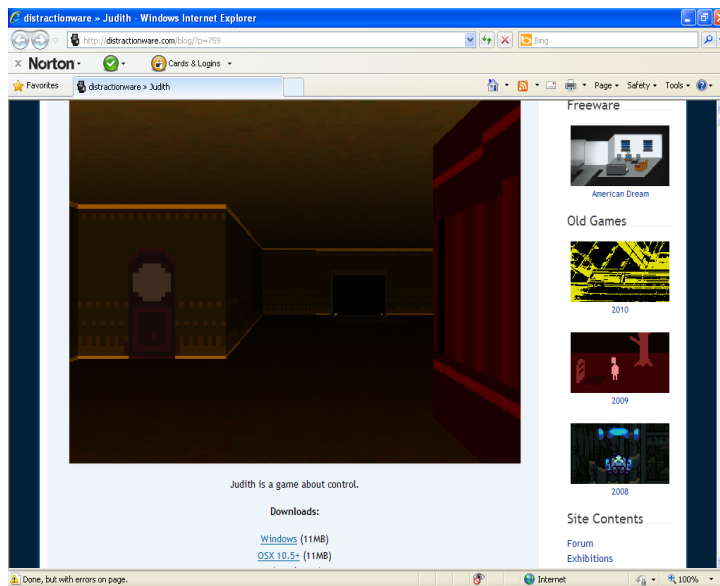


Figure 4: The interactive fiction game, *Judith*

Judith's graphics are basic. This is not a game based on cutting edge, sophisticated imagery and lifelike graphics. In order for a game such as this to connect with an audience, it must rely on something other than flashy images: it must rely on story. The blurb at the bottom of the game, which says ‘*Judith* is a game about control’, puts it firmly into the game category. *Judith* resides on *East of the Web*, a website that has three categories, all geared towards writing and stories: Short Stories,

Interactive Fiction and Word Games. Readers/players are able to provide comments on *Judith*, and below is a selection of comments from the site:

AuthenticKaizen on April 13th, 2009

excellent story telling and atmosphere!
played it with headphones.
great work!
inspired by bluebeard, right?

Shane on April 13th, 2009

I've never had a bunch of 8-bit pixel images and words give me chills up and down my spine like this did. Very Poe-esque. Not much of a game, really an interactive story. Very well done though, I enjoyed it!

Christopher Armstrong on April 13th, 2009

Terry, please don't stop making games which experiment with narrative. And thank you for introducing me to Stephen's blog and games; I've got another developer to keep track of.

These comments show the game's players (or readers) are engaging with the game using literary frameworks ('excellent story telling', 'inspired by Bluebeard, right?', 'very Poe-esque', 'Not much of a game, really an interactive story', 'please don't stop making games which experiment with narrative'). They also show that the author is alive to the user – there is communication between them. *Judith* illustrates a hybridisation of the notions of story and game.

Websites such as *East of the Web* demonstrate elements of Bruns' idea of produsage. In this model the author is accepting the collaboration of a computer program, and the reader takes part in this and leaves a trail of comments that the author can access, in doing so creating 'data trails' (223) which 'affect one another's experience of the shared online knowledge space' (223-224). The author has always been a collaborator – in traditional models, the collaboration has been with editors, typesetters, designers, publishers. In new internet-based storytelling models the

collaborators are different, but the collaboration principle still applies. However, there is increased transparency around this alliance because of the ‘data trails’ that are left behind for all to see. For the digital native this is a non-issue. It is simply status quo, and the interactivity facilitated by this type of storytelling suits the non-linear attention of the digital native. But for the digital immigrant, this is a concept that requires a renegotiation of ideas and expectations around story.

Hypertext fiction, an early predecessor of IF, is a related area of digital writing. Joyce defines hypertext fiction as ‘reading and writing in an order you choose where your choices change the nature of what you read’ (581). Hypertext fiction does not have the visual element of IF: it is text-based. In hypertext fiction, narratives are branching, leading to multiple narrative strands that may or may not reconnect. Again, the reader is interacting with the story, making decisions and participating in the creation of the narrative. This type of storytelling gives the digital immigrant reader much more control over the story than they are used to. Petrelli and Wright discovered that by handing over control to the reader in hypertext fiction, the reader can become uncomfortable. Readers who are used to being in the trustworthy hands of the author suddenly find that the parameters they are accustomed to knowing before they embark on reading have vanished: if you pick up a book you know how many pages are in it, how many chapters, the approximate depth and breadth of the story. In hypertext fiction (if it does not provide the reader with a map) these things are unknown. A reader who is used to holding a printed book chooses to relinquish control of the storytelling to the author; the reader embarking on a hypertext reading experience must accept a degree of control over the story.

This does not mean that branching narratives cannot work. Petrelli and Wright showed that readers felt most uncomfortable when there was no narrative map – it was not so much the concept of a branching narrative, but rather that the

reader could not glimpse the whole landscape of the text from the outset, setting boundaries for them. This feeling of being lost in an unknown branching narrative had an unwelcome consequence for the story: readers found they were concentrating more on the decision making and orientating themselves than on the story itself (519). The readers were taken out of the world of the story and the story lost its power. This raises questions about the role of the active reader, and Petrelli and Wright conclude that the:

...pleasure of reading seems to come from following a story that readers have no control over...Readers like the freedom to embellish, but did not like the idea of being a creative force in the overall story being told. They see their creative role as limited to imagining events related to the story...Digital fiction that conforms to this principle seems to be more appreciated.
Petrelli and Wright 519

However, branching narratives occur in print too. *Hopscotch* by Julio Cortázar is an example of a print book that uses the idea of a branching narrative. Cortázar uses 155 chapters to provide snapshots of characters. Ninety-nine of these chapters are deemed expendable and are not essential to the narrative. They can be read if the reader chooses, and will provide additional depth and detail, but the narrative can survive without them. There are multiple endings which the reader can arrive at depending on how they have chosen to read the text: front to back, odd or even pages, random chapter selection. There are echoes of this idea in my creative work, *On Smith Street*, which can be read in multiple ways (I will discuss this in detail in Chapter 3). Clearly, branching narratives can work both online and in print, however Petrelli and Wright might offer a caveat that is only the case if the reader is not expected to do too much of the work so that the contract between reader and writer remains in balance.

Flash fiction is very short fiction (as discussed earlier, short short stories, usually under 1000 words) and is a genre that is by no means exclusive to digital channels, but, like the branching narrative, seems to be well suited to this medium. Ernest Hemingway is often referred to as one of the first writers of flash fiction, however it was Thomas, Thomas and Hazuka who coined the phrase ‘flash fiction’ in 1992 with their story collection *Flash Fiction*. James Thomas says this in his introduction to *Flash Fiction*:

Like all fiction that matters...[short stories] success depends not on their length but on their depth, their clarity of vision, their human significance – the extent to which the reader is able to recognize in them the real stuff of real life.
Thomas 12

Flash fiction requires the author to be brief, and, as discussed earlier, brevity works online. When a story is pared back to the degree of a flash, so much can be deleted or brushed over that, more than ever before, notions of what constitutes a story are questioned. There are those advocates of the genre who are adamant that flash fiction needs to contain all the elements of longer fiction – character development, setting, plot progression – and there are those who argue that a flash fiction can be a vignette, a snippet, or even an image. Lydia Davis is known for writing stories as short as one sentence, or one paragraph, and certainly in these stories some of these elements are missing. An example of one of Davis’ shortest pieces is following:

Love

A woman fell in love with a man who has been dead a number of years. It was not enough for her to brush his coats, wipe his inkwell, finger his ivory comb: she had to

build her house over his grave and sit with him night after
night in the damp cellar.
Davis 178

Or this story, also by Davis, and shorter still:

Certain Knowledge from Herodotus
These are the facts about the fish in the Nile:
Davis 325

Flash fiction was created as a form for print publication, indeed when James Thomas coined the term, he chose the word count of 750 words in part because he envisioned ‘a story on a two-page spread [and] 750 words seemed about tops for conventional, readable typography’ (12). However, since then, flash fiction has become a popular written form on the internet. Online publishers such as *Smoke Long Quarterly* have been exclusively publishing flash fiction online since 2003. Pioneering journal *dotdotdash* questioned the notion of what constitutes story in each issue. In their Autumn 2010 issue they challenged writers and artists to create a story on a single Post-It Note. In their Summer 2009 issue, they encouraged writers to submit 50 word stories. Brian Dibble, when introducing the winners of the competition, said this in relation to flash fiction:

Innovation can be regarded as work that ‘breaks the
rules’, the result sometimes becoming a new rule or...a
new genre.
Dibble 40

Journals such as *dotdotdash*, which produced its final issue in December 2013, reinforce a trend towards storytelling that includes a visual element and celebrates the shortest of fiction styles.

Authors who are working in fields where experimentation and brevity are key concepts are left with the decision of just how much they will show the reader, and how much they will allow readers to bring to the story and to embellish. What will the contract be between the writer and reader? The fine balance of these things is perhaps the difference between successful and unsuccessful hypertext fiction, just as the fine balance of what a writer leaves in a tight flash fiction story and what they take out determines its success as a brief, spare and tightly woven piece of prose. What does this mean for writers on the brink of digital engagement? Possibly it means that with the limitations of print publishing diminishing, writers are freed to take greater risks in their writing and are readers freed to read more adventurously. As Wendy Martin said, 'The Internet reopened the space for an alternative literature, much the way the...modernist magazine reopened spaces for Bohemian thought (920).

Innovation in print and online publishing appears to be driven by an increasing desire for non-linear narrative, stories with visual components and short word counts. Much of this innovation can be seen to be facilitated by the internet, but its effect has spilt over into the print world. This relationship can be seen as an oscillation between two giant influences: the historical canon of English literature and all of its traditions, lessons and baggage, versus the awe-inducing barrage of invention that is the internet.

Part 2: Digimodernism

In this chapter I will examine the idea that postmodernism is being challenged by an emerging theory: digimodernism. I will discuss digimodernism in relation to the short story as well as emerging creative forms that have short story at their root.

Has postmodernism run its course?

Since the 1950s postmodernism has ‘consistently challenged our understanding of unity, subjectivity, epistemology aesthetics, ethics, history and politics’ (Taylor). It is an on-going process of ‘disintegration and reformation within a multitude of artistic, cultural, and intellectual traditions’ (Taylor). According to Maltby, it ‘loosely encompasses or relates to a series of movements, sometimes incompatible, that emerged in affluent countries in Europe and of European descent in art, architecture, literature, music, the social sciences and humanities’. At its core, postmodernism ‘involves a radical questioning of the grounds upon which knowledge claims are made, and is thereby linked to a sense of liberation from limiting earlier practices’ (Maltby). However, there are those who would challenge its current dominance.

David Foster Wallace longed to move beyond postmodernism, which he said focussed on ‘sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct’ (Eve, 7). The irony that Wallace railed against is still seen by many as critically important. Jonathan Lear said, ‘whatever’s going wrong here, it’s not irony’ (Finocchiaro). Lear’s comments are in rebuttal to an article published by Matt Ashby and Brendan Carrol in which they argue that:

At one time, irony served to reveal hypocrisies, but now it simply acknowledges one’s cultural compliance and familiarity with pop trends. The art of irony has lost its vision and its edge. The rebellious posture of the past has

been annexed by the very commercialism it sought to defy.
Ashby and Carrol n.pag.

Ashby and Carrol seek an artistic future in which ‘rebels of sincerity’ dare to create rather than destroy, seek participation over spectatorship and aim for honesty and sincerity. It is the concept of sincerity versus irony that Lear finds fault with. For Lear, irony, when ‘properly understood is a very high form of sincerity and earnestness, not its opposite’. Those who fear the demise of postmodernism are concerned with the move towards sincerity:

Sceptics reject sincerity because they worry that blind belief can lead to such evils as the Ku Klux Klan and Nazism. They think that conviction implies vulnerability to emotional rhetoric and lack of critical awareness.
Ashby and Carrol n.pag.

Postmodernism emerged in the 1950s as a reaction against the constraints of modernism, but by the 1990s it was being questioned:

While critics at century’s end began to anatomize the end of postmodernism, mapping “postmodernism’s wake” (Harris), or announcing the emergence of “post-postmodernism” (McLaughlin), the conflict between postmodern innovation and more conventional narrative forms was internalized and played out in Franzen’s novels and essays.
Burn IX

The fear that Ashby and Carrol alluded to assumes that because there is a push for sincerity and hope, thought will regress back into old school modernism. However, it does not necessarily follow that because there is a move away from postmodernism’s cynicism and irony towards a model of hope and sincerity that this move will be a backwards step towards a kind of neo-modernism. It is possible that the lessons of postmodernism can be a part of a move towards a future that rekindles hope.

Out of these gradually developing schisms in the 1990s emerged several schools of thought. I will examine one of those, digimodernism, in this chapter, although I wish to acknowledge that digimodernism has not succeeded in supplanting postmodernism. Post-postmodern theory is in its infancy and digimodernism has not been widely accepted as a definitive response to postmodernism, but the ideas developed by its creator, Alan Kirby, are interesting in relation to the changing short story.

Digimodernism

Alan Kirby (2009) posited a range of ideas in an attempt to characterise post-postmodernism. He identified seven characteristics of the digimodern:

1. **Onwardness:** texts are growing and incomplete. Texts are no longer presented to readers as made and finished. They have a start but no end.
Example, we can see this in blogs and news articles in which readers add comments, extending the author's argument or harpooning it. These texts are conversational and open to dialogue.
2. **Haphazardness:** the future of the text is unknown, undecided. There is infinite potential to take the text in different directions, to change it.
Example: remixes of songs on websites such as CC Mixter which discourage traditional notions of copyright. The original text can be remixed and used for an entirely different purpose than that for which it was created.
3. **Evanescence:** the text is difficult to capture and archive. It is not intended to be a reproducible item.
Example: Kirby uses examples such as TV shows that involve audience participation to determine 'scripts' or outcomes – such as *Dancing with the*

Stars or *Big Brother*. These types of cultural artefacts can never be recreated because of the unpredictable nature of audience participation.

4. **Reformulations and intermediation of textual roles:** all textual functional roles are radically changed. Terms such as author, reader, listener, reviewer and editor have new hybridised meanings.

Example: The author is now often required to take on many roles outside of 'just writing'. Authors are editors, reviewers (of their own work and others') publishers, readers, marketers, bloggers, Tweeters.

5. **Anonymous, multiple and social authorship:** authorship is scattered across social communities, which may be anonymous or pseudoanonymous.

Example: Participation in online communities is often anonymous.

6. **Fluid-bound text:** texts become unrecognisable – they are no longer just words on a page or sounds on a disk.

Example: A video game is a text, and the act of voting on *Big Brother* is a textual act.

7. **Electric-digitality:** digimodernist texts rely on technology. They are not primarily optical, but rather are manually-oriented.

Example: Texts in the digimodern world require input that is often based around a screen and a keyboard, or similar technology. Readers do not passively read or hear a text, they physically take part in its creation or consumption, even if it is just with their thumbs.

Kirby *Digimodernism* 52-53

These characteristics come together to form what Kirby sees as a culture of consumerism and infantilisation, characterised by the explosive popularity of texts written for children, but consumed by adults (for example, the *Harry Potter* books)

(220). He claims this culture is shallow and narcissistic, ‘but what it really isn’t, is ironic’ (153). With this death of irony and emergence of infantilisation comes the ‘death of competence’, which Kirby elaborates is the ‘evacuation of the value of competence in public fields...the withering away of expectation of competence in personal fields...the diminished social valorization and economic reward of technical competence’ (241).

Kirby acknowledges that it has taken literature longer to adopt the digimodernity that television, music, film and radio have adopted. Indeed, he comments that, ‘It is almost possible to argue that digimodernist literature does not exist’ (218). He likens digimodernism to the Renaissance, in which the aesthetic shifts were first felt in architecture, painting and sculpture, and in which the shifts in literature were related to technology, for example Gutenberg’s printing press (218-219). For Kirby, literature reflects digimodernism not through changes in writing styles, narrative structures or interactivity, but through technological shifts in the physical production of books (ebooks, Google Books, print-on-demand) all of which serve to potentially increase the life-span and distribution of books. Kirby also recognises the increased socialisation of reading brought about by digimodernism, which he characterises by ‘book clubs’:

Reading structured by such broadly digimodernist practices is distinct again: social and commercialized, it favors the ‘fan’ and makes a cult of the author while assuming that a text’s meaning emerges from its social use.

Kirby *Digimodernism* 219

It is in the phrase ‘a text’s meaning emerges from its social use’ that Kirby comes close to describing the digitisation of online literature. It is precisely in the realm of the internet that reading and books do generate meaning through socialisation. Kirby

believes that the future of digital literature is not in the realm of hypertext, however Mangen disagrees, saying, ‘new media scholars and hypertext theorists still express a dedicated belief in hypertext fiction advancing from its present state as largely unknown, to becoming some of, if not the, most exciting forms of literature to come’. Hayles appears to agree, saying that, ‘as the body of literary hypertext grows, I anticipate that it will become an increasingly important part of literature in the new millennium’ (1997).

Kirby claims that hypertext is dead because outside of niche markets ‘no one is interested, to be brutally honest’ (*Digimodernism* 221); because functionally the technology is outdated; and because ‘hypertext fictions are somewhat joyless affairs’ (*Digimodernism*, 222). As explained in Chapter 1, hypertext fiction poses challenges that some readers of fiction are not interested in, but that does not mean that it did not serve its purpose. Hypertext fiction was an important part of a process towards understanding what readers want in the digital space, and like so much experimentation, it influenced other artists to create in new ways. For example, out of hypertext came Interactive Fiction (IF), and from IF came *Social Samba* (a social media platform I will elaborate on later in the chapter). As Kirby rightly points out, digimodern readers crave the *socialisation* of their reading experience, but by-and-large, they do not want to be co-creators of the *original* text. The socialisation of the reading experience can include creating texts that extend the original text (for example, *Social Samba* texts, fan fiction, blogs, website comments, interactions with the author and other readers), but the original text itself retains a degree of completeness.

There is much about Kirby’s digimodernism that reflects my lived experience. Clearly texts are changing, authorial roles are changing, technology is changing, texts are becoming endless and haphazard. However, it is less clear that

these things should be characterised in the negative. Kirby characterises the emotional state of digimodernism as trance-like, in deep contrast to the ‘hyper-consciousness of irony’ (‘The Death of Postmodernism’) that characterised postmodernism, but his evidence of this trance-like state is flawed. He describes trance as being ‘swallowed up by your activity’ (‘The Death of Postmodernism’). This state might be recognised in an addiction to mobile phones and the constant need to feel connected. However, Kirby says this is a false connectedness:

In place of the neurosis of modernism and the narcissism of postmodernism, pseudo-modernism *takes the world away*, by creating a new weightless nowhere of silent autism. You click, you punch the keys, you are ‘involved’, engulfed, deciding. You are the text, there is no-one else, no ‘author’; there is nowhere else, no other time or place. You are free: you are the text: the text is superseded. Kirby ‘The Death of Postmodernism’(Kirby’s emphasis) n.pag.

These two ideas – socialisation of literature and the trance like state of connectedness – do not neatly fit together. On the one hand Kirby explains that literature is being socialised, and on the other he claims that digimodern socialisation is trance-like and mindless. Many internet users have experienced mindless clicking and certainly that is a part of the online culture, but it is also possible to participate in deeply engaging exchanges online. These two things do not need to be mutually exclusive and creating a binary opposition between them goes against the very principles of postmodernism.

I will now examine several modes of production of digital texts, all of which engage with digimodern ideas, to determine how well Kirby’s characterisation of digital culture holds up. I have deliberately chosen modes of production that are non-mainstream for two reasons. Firstly, very few digimodern modes of production for

literature are in operation in the mainstream, and secondly, it is precisely within these non-mainstream sites of production that innovative work is taking place.

Social Samba

Social Samba is a web-delivered program, freely available to anyone with a computer and internet connection, which allows writers to create scripted *Facebook*-style experiences. Readers can become ‘friends’ with the characters in the story and become a part of the story themselves – the reader enters their first name and gender and they are written into the story. The reader responds to questions and their answers determine the direction the story takes. This is interactive fiction that is modelled on *Facebook*, mimicking the visual interface and its post/comment style of writing, as can be seen in Figure 1 below.

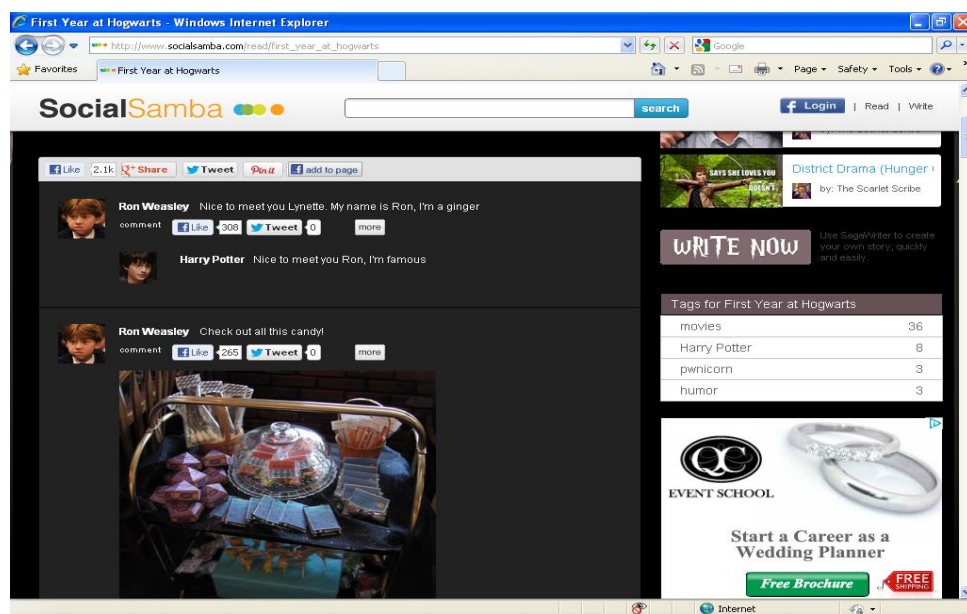


Figure 1: *Social Samba - First Year at Hogwarts*

Often *Social Samba* stories take the form of fan fiction, extending on popular genre novels such as *Twilight* or *Harry Potter*, and increasingly they are used by television

networks in North America to more deeply engage fans in the shows they are broadcasting. According to Aaron Williams, CEO of *Social Samba*:

Social Samba is a platform for scripted social networking – which means we enable fans to ‘friend’ the characters they love from TV, movies, books, and brands, and experience what it’s like to be part of a social network with those characters.
Liebling n.pag.

Social Samba texts fulfil Kirby’s criteria for the digimodern. They are *haphazard* – the future of the text is unknown and there is potential to take the text in different directions. They are *evanescent* – it is difficult to capture the text as each reader’s experience is potentially different. They *reformulate textual roles* – the reader becomes both character in the story and part-author of the story. *Authorship is anonymous, multiple and social* – *Social Samba* writers often use pseudonyms, and stories are often created by a team. The purpose of *Social Samba* in its commercial context is to engage television viewers in an interactive, social experience that engages them more deeply than television on its own. The text is *fluid bound*. Is *Social Samba* a story or a game, or something else altogether? And finally of course the text depends entirely on *digital technology*.

But, are these texts inherently autistic, deranged and infantile? Certainly you could argue that is the case for some of the stories on *Social Samba*. However, some of the stories are clever, funny, engaging and boundary-pushing. One story, *Psych HashTag Killer*, won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Creative Achievement in Interactive Media – Original Interactive Television Programming in 2012, which in and of itself does not prove the quality of the work, but it does prove that the industry

takes this work seriously and sees this interactive fiction component as important to contemporary television viewing.

Kirby's reaction to digimodern texts brings to mind Hayles' response to an article by Mark Bauerlein:

As Bauerlein moves from the solid longitudinal data on the decline in print reading to the digital realm, the evidence becomes scantier and the anecdotes more frequent, with examples obviously weighted towards showing the inanity of online chats, blogs, and *Facebook* entries. It would, of course, be equally possible to harvest examples showing depth, profundity, and brilliance of online discourse, so Bauerlein's argument here fails to persuade.

Hayles 'How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine' 63

I would argue that Kirby's argument around digimodern texts fits a similar pattern to Bauerlein's, and thus also 'fails to persuade'. He seeks, and finds, the banality which is always accessible in any culture or society and does not seek the profundity that is also available but perhaps less visible. To write a *Social Samba* story that is worth reading is a difficult task, much like writing a worthy film script is a difficult task. It involves skills in character development, dialogue and images need to be chosen and appropriately used. This skill set has parallels with traditional screen writing, however this is a new genre requiring a specific skill set. *Social Samba* stories that are heavy on scene setting, for example, are exceptionally dull. Those that focus on dialogue, and use dialogue to create character, are far more successful.

As Kelly Czarnecki in *Digital Storytelling in Practice* says:

Knowing how to effectively create a story structure, develop strong characters, establish appropriate timing and expand plot are aspects of storytelling that do not disappear with the digital format. In fact, these elements take on different meaning and require new skills as the

storyteller must learn how to effectively weave technology into the work without losing the soul of the story.
Czarnecki 7

There is a subjective spectrum of quality within traditionally published literature, and there is a subjective spectrum of quality within *Social Samba* stories. *Social Samba* is a *framework* for a new type of storytelling that is not purely film or text but is entirely new. It is fallacious to say that all literature is bad simply because you read a bad novel, or even many bad novels. Similarly, you cannot say that *Social Samba* is bad because you have read a bad one, or even many. The framework does not determine the quality of the individual product.

Social Samba is a commercial proposition operating within the much larger framework of Hollywood and big budget television and as discussed in Chapter 1, beyond *Social Samba*, small interactive fiction subcultures still exist. Within this subculture, active steps are taken to remain on the outskirts of mainstream culture, rather than seek fame and fortune. Nick Montfort says, ‘Like poetry, interactive fiction does not need to be lucrative to become a form that helps us gain new realizations about our world, a form that is relevant to our lives’ (*Twisty Little Passages*, 231). However, the subversive idea of a computer, author and reader interacting to create a story does show a move further away from the Romantic notion of the author: in the IF model the author is accepting the collaboration of a computer program, and the reader takes part in this and knows the author is not in control of all possible outcomes. The authority of the author is further diminished, and the roles of reader and author are blurred.

The collaborative and social nature of this kind of creative work also stands in contrast to Kirby’s view that digimodern culture is trance-like and autistic. These projects, be they *Social Samba* or fringe projects such as *Judith on East of the Web*

(see Chapter 1), show a deep level of engagement between collaborative creators (writers, programmers, graphic artists) and the reading public.

Smashwords

Smashwords is a website that allows authors to publish their ebooks for free. The author's work is formatted into an ebook that is compatible with all e-reader formats and distributed through a substantial list of ebook sellers. *Smashwords* is a successful business, creating bestselling books that have reached the heights of the *New York Times* Bestseller lists. In 2012 Mark Coker, founder of *Smashwords*, said, 'It's a big deal to see a single *Smashwords* author on the *New York Times* Bestseller list, let alone four in one week. A year ago, it was unheard of. A year from now, it'll be more commonplace.' In 2015 *Smashwords* released their annual survey which revealed \$25 million U.S. dollars in sales for the 12 month period April 2014 to March 2015. Those sales were across several sales platforms: Apple iBooks, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, the Smashwords Store, Scribd, OverDrive, Amazon, Baker & Taylor Axis 360, Blio, Oyster, Flipkart and Inktera (2015).

Self-publishing sites such as *Smashwords* are a force to be reckoned with, and self-publishing, in its various guises, is gaining momentum. This type of publishing is fundamentally digimodern: *Smashwords* texts are *onward and haphazard* – new iterations can be published at the author's will, and readers can review them. In a personal discussion I had with a *Smashwords* author, he described to me how he uses this process to improve his work, examining readers' suggestions and making changes; hence the reader becomes involved in the authorship of the text. This process is not dissimilar to one used by musicians throughout the age of recorded music – it is common for musicians to try out new songs at live performances and

gauge audience reaction, fine-tuning their song until they are ready to record it. When looked at in this way, it is not such a radical idea that the reader takes part in the construction of the written text. The *Smashwords* author is present but *ephemeral*, and the work is *ongoing* and *haphazard*. Again, as with *Social Samba* and interactive fiction in general, the idea that these texts are inherently infantile is problematic: to criticise the content of the work published on *Smashwords* is easy – as should be plainly obvious, any website that publishes work that has not gone through a curatorial process is bound to publish varying quality. Does this make the content worthless? Some, but not all. And perhaps only on a bigger scale than traditional publishing, which has produced its fair share of clangers too.

One of Kirby's primary concerns with digimodernism is its obsession with consumerism, but in fact many digimodern technologies encourage anti-consumerist behaviour, or at the very least a philosophy of sharing and 'try before you buy'. *Smashwords* actively encourages authors to make their work available for free. This is a marketing ploy aimed at enticing readers to read unknown work, but rather than being interpreted as a kind of manic consumerism, it is seen by authors and readers alike as a gesture intended to develop trust. An unknown author is unlikely to attract readers amongst the plethora of voices on offer in *Smashwords*, though Coker regularly provides tips on how to make your work stand out, many of which related to pricing strategies (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). The offer of free material – sometimes a portion of a book, sometimes the entire book – creates a trust-based network of readers and writers that encourages interaction based on good faith which may then lead to an exchange of money.

The Jew's Daughter

Previous examples I have discussed have been websites that publish multiple works by multiple authors. I will now look at an example of a website that focuses on one story and deliberately controls reader intervention. *The Jew's Daughter* (Morrissey) is a prose-poem story with unstable text that changes when readers roll their cursor over a highlighted word. Morrissey authored the story and created the technology behind the text (although the website states that the 'mechanics of reconfiguration [were] designed in collaboration with Lori Talley'). The story is described on the website as follows:

The Jew's Daughter is an interactive, non-linear, multi-valent narrative, a storyspace that is unstable but nonetheless remains organically intact, progressively weaving itself together by way of subtle transformations on a single virtual page.
Morrissey n.pag.

As Figure 2 shows, the entire text of the story fits on a single screen. At any time one word is highlighted in blue – this is the hypertext link. The reader hovers the cursor over the highlighted word, a section of the text changes, and a new word is highlighted in blue. There is only one word hyperlinked at any time, so, unlike in traditional hypertext fiction, the reader is not given a choice about how to move through the text. As Jessica Pressman describes this (on *The Jew's Daughter* website), 'Shifting the content's context destabilizes the act and the process of reading. The reader of *The Jew's Daughter* learns to expect disorientation within the words themselves.'

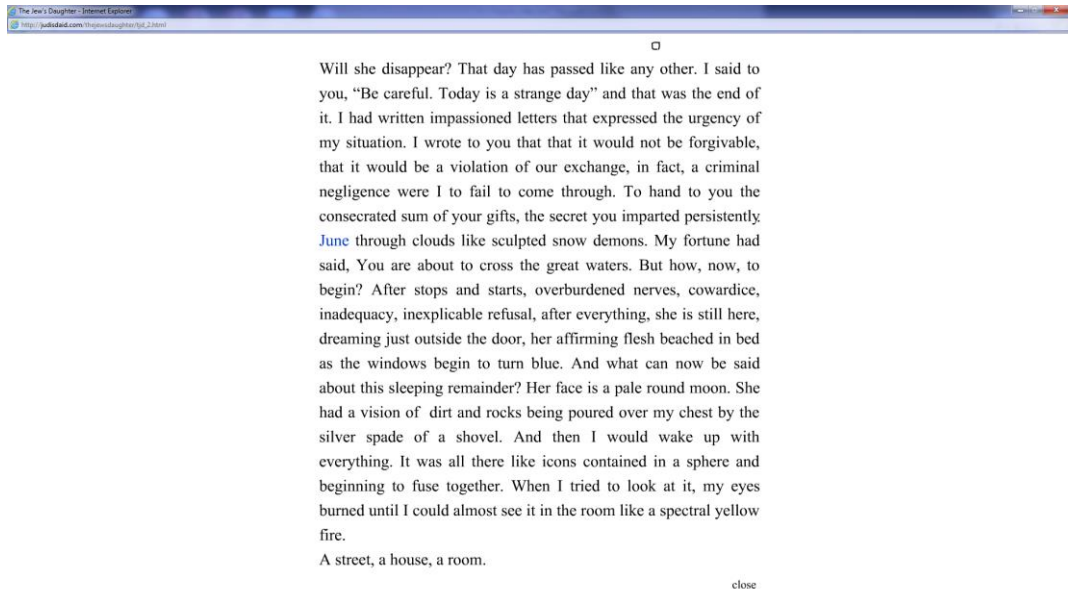


Figure 2: *The Jew's Daughter* by Judd Morrissey

Morrissey's work is experimental, and defies many of Kirby's digimodernist tropes. In this case, the single author has control over how the text was created, and how it will be read. While authorship is somewhat changed (the author is also the programmer, in conjunction with a collaborator whose role is clearly defined as being about 'mechanics', not creative elements) the idea of multiple, anonymous authorship is not at play here. The text is certainly capable of being onward – *The Jew's Daughter* is on many university syllabi (according to the website, although it does not list which universities), and the website lists reviews and comments from scholars and readers, but again the author is in complete control of what appears on the website: the reviews are first vetted before they are published. Any comments are sent by email to the author, rather than being posted straight to the website. The author has put in place strategies to maintain control over how the website is used (though he cannot control what happens outside of the website). Similarly, this text is not evanescent in the sense that Kirby means: each time you read the story, the

pathway is exactly the same. The experience of reading *The Jew's Daughter* is completely reproducible.

What I aim to show from this example is that while Morrissey's work meets some of Kirby's digimodernist criteria, it also pushes the boundaries of the criteria. It shows that digimodern writing has nuance and differentiation. Morrissey has sought to create a work of art that utilises digital technology in a fresh way, but where the technology is never allowed to dominate the storytelling. This is an example of what can happen when digital experimentation meets creativity and a desire to produce outstanding art.

Alan Kirby quotes John Harris (in relation to music) saying that 'the mainstream is all there is' and music has become 'homogenized and conformist' (*Digimodernism*, 214). However, the mainstream is not 'all there is' – it is not even what is most interesting – and this examination of some emerging forms of digital fiction show that in fact the peripheries are often where innovation happens. Those innovations may fade into obscurity, or become mainstream successes, or gain small but significant followings, but their value cannot always be measured by this type of success: their influence on other creators is also important.

Kirby finds almost no greatness in digimodern culture (notable exceptions for Kirby are the rock band *Radiohead*, a BBC talk back radio station and Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy) and this may be because he has failed to acquire a high level of digital literacy and is simply applying print literacy tropes to a new form. He is seeking to apply close reading techniques without adopting the digital literacy techniques that Hayles (2012) acknowledges are also critical in this cultural landscape. In doing this he fails to see the opportunities digimodernism provides, the experimentation, bravery, creativity, engagement, community and equity. Kirby underestimates the possibilities of digimodernism – in the digimodern space the

audience can become more intricately involved in the making of the cultural product in an attempt to take control over their entertainment experiences. They can become producers (Bruns). Certainly this does not always result in successful or even meaningful texts, but that is hardly the point. Digimodern texts are often micro – made small scale, small budget, intended for small and exclusive or niche audiences, and often physically small too, as in the case of short stories or YouTube short films. This is a usurping of mainstream media’s power that should make postmodernists such as Kirby weep with joy. Instead he chooses to see the ‘poison’ in this breaking down of the hierarchy of culture makers. This brings to mind Wright’s thoughts on the subject of new media and change, ‘New media, in many respects, dissolves authority’ (90). Looked at from this point of view, Kirby’s claims appear petulant. Does his scorn for digimodernism reveal his lament at his own fall from the heights of postmodern authority?

The mainstream still exists in a digimodern world that has been swamped by micro texts, of course. Often, the mainstream emerges from the creative innovations of the peripheries. YouTube videos or independent musicians go ‘viral’, reaching mass audiences. According to Li and Bernoff big business uses social media in an attempt to create advertising that will sidestep the cynicism of its media-saturated audience. For them, the new cultural gatekeepers are on Twitter (200). This whittling away of hierarchies shows a further breaking down of the modernist landscape that postmodernism took great strides towards dismantling. In digimodernism authors are by no means reinstated as the creators of hermetically sealed textual worlds, removed from external context. Quite the opposite is true. For the digimodern text, reader input is not just encouraged, it is essential. Perhaps, though, interaction is pushed too far, such as in reading hypertext fiction, where the reader is forced into the sometimes uncomfortable position of being the director of the story experience.

As Ian Reid stated (see Chapter 1), short stories have retained an element of Romanticism, of telling the stories of the disenfranchised and excluded, of finding a voice for the voiceless. Within this idea literature, despite all the lessons of postmodernism, has retained an unquenchable desire for authenticity. In Kirby's digimodern world there is no such desire, no such authenticity. And yet, as a writer, I find myself in a constant search for small subjective truths. These small truths may only apply to my characters, and not a centimetre further, but in order to develop characters that are believable, I look for their truths – their authenticity. One of the key functions of literature has always been, and will continue to be, to uncover small personal truths. Writers seek to uncover small truths because without them our characters are hollow, our plots pointless and our settings flat. Terry Eagleton acknowledges the continuing relevance of truth. He points out the many contradictions of postmodernism, not the least of which is the idea that in denying truth we are in fact entering into a binary opposition:

...for all its talk of difference, plurality, heterogeneity, postmodern theory often operates with quite rigid binary oppositions, with 'difference, 'plurality' and allied terms lined up bravely on one side of the theoretical fence as unequivocally positive, and whatever their antitheses might be (unity, identity, totality, universality) ranged balefully on the other.

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If postmodernists abhor binary oppositions for the dangers of exclusion and demonisation that they engender, then the idea of 'truth' cannot be replaced in its entirety with subjectivity. A more satisfying approach to the idea of truth is to accept that the binary opposition of truth versus falsehood is dangerous, and a spectrum of subjective truths is safer.

Digimodernism feels too flawed (and, too cynical) to be the answer to 'what comes next'. It does not feel like a satisfying segue from postmodernism to the nextism. Kirby has addressed something tangible about the world in which we live, but does not have the skills, or desire, to engage in a close reading of the digital world that results in a meaningful outcome.

In the next chapter I draw these ideas together as I examine how experimentation and engagement with the digital, combined with a deeply non-cynical desire for authentic stories, influenced my print-bound short stories.

Part 3: Experimenting in print and digital writing

The processes of researching the short story's evolution and examining digimodernism and experimental short-form online writing influenced my creative writing. In this chapter I examine how these influences impacted my process and the writing that resulted from it, and I also look at three print works that were influential (Richard James Allen's *The Kamikaze Mind*, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and Ryan O'Neill's *The Weight of a Human Heart*). These works were chosen because they have challenged the rules of what short fiction can be.

Engaging with the print world and finding structure

Towards the end of the process of drafting my creative component I had over sixty stories, none of which appeared to be connected. The lack of connection and cohesion between the stories bothered me and I looked to other written works for ideas about how I could corral this disjointed collection into something more meaningful. One such written work was Richard James Allen's *The Kamikaze Mind* (2006). In this experimental fiction print book, Allen creates a dictionary of sorts – the alphabetised, fractured thoughts of an astronaut who launches himself into space (9). This structure allows readers to dip in and out without committing to the process of reading a linear narrative. *The Kamikaze Mind* is a fractured text, and yet it is not disconnected; each definition is meaningful within the whole: each entry builds to create a complete picture, yet the reading order is irrelevant.

After reading Allen's work I experimented with the idea of an alphabetised list of stories. It seemed like an interesting way to address the disconnectedness of my stories, a kind of recognition of their randomness. But in attempting to structure my stories in this way it became clear that for my stories (unlike Allen's) there was nothing to be gained by collecting them in this way. It felt forced and did not give the

stories that extra edge that I felt they needed; it was *too* random and did not bring anything new to the whole. In the case of Allen's book, there was a purpose to the structure, and the meta-story of the text fed the structure of the text. In my case, the structure felt like an attempt at a cheap trick without any purpose. From this process the fact that an experimental form must have a *purpose* became very clear to me. Allen's structure made sense for the story he was telling, but it did not make sense for my stories. A trick or gimmick for the purpose of being innovative or imitative was pointless and ultimately devalued the text as a whole. Yet I still hoped to challenge the narrative norm in a way that resulted in deeper meaning within the text.

I discussed my dilemma with colleagues. A friend and fellow writer, Anna Solding, suggested I read *Underground Road* by Sharon Kernot. In this novel all the characters live on the same street. Their lives intersect as they move through the neighbourhood, as they observe each other's houses and watch the comings and goings of social workers and police. While Kernot's work is a novel, not short stories, this prompted the idea of having all my characters live on the same street. For many of my stories, the structure fell into place immediately. For characters who had longer stories, I was able to break those stories into chapters, allowing a character's narrative to develop through the course of the collection. There were also many stories that had to be one-offs. For these stories I considered whether it worked to have these characters living on the same street. My characters are diverse – there are young people, middle aged people, older people, wealthy, homeless and middle class. Could one street house this kind of diversity? I decided that it could. I recalled long streets in Adelaide's south-east near city suburbs where one residential road could span between two major arterial roads and cross two suburbs. Within this framework I created Smith Street, named in order that it could seem to be anywhere. I lined the street with Plane trees with finger-like forked branches that bend towards

the middle of the road, creating an enclosed space, so that although Smith Street could be anywhere, it was also isolated, cut off and quarantined. Within this space I could place all my characters and stories.

As I looked through the stories within their newly created structure it felt as though, perhaps subconsciously, I had intended this, or something like it, all along. I had, inadvertently, created a short story cycle. Ingram describes a short story cycle as, ‘a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit’ (15). The tension between the individuality and the larger unit are key to the success of a story cycle: individuality must not overpower the whole. For the *On Smith Street* collection, this was an important consideration. With the stories starting out as individual entities, how could they be brought together in such a way that the whole had greater meaning than the individual stories? It was a great delight to discover that this structure allowed me to develop more depth within the stories and between them. The collection now worked on many levels: there were themes emerging and connections between characters that were surprisingly obvious. The stories themselves could still be read as individual entities, and made sense like this. They could also be read as sequences related to particular characters, and one thread, for the main protagonist Jennifer, could be read as a novella.

The stories could also be read from beginning to end in the structure I created. Read in this way, the stories represented the theme of ‘growing up’. The characters early in the collection are young; for example in ‘How To Disappear Incompletely’ a young woman has picked up a musician for a one night stand and is considering how to get rid of him the day after, and in ‘Dear Diary’ a teenage girl who knows her brother is reading her private diary plans her revenge. Then I look at older characters; for example in ‘Becca’s Red Dress’ a marriage breaks down, in

‘The Theatre’ a woman remembers her childhood performances in a theatre that is being demolished, and the main protagonist, Jennifer, is a woman in her thirties wondering how her life went so badly off course. Towards the end I explore the lives of older people, for example in ‘Kind of Blue’ I consider the terrible suffering dementia causes both the patient and their loved ones, and ‘North Atlantic Farewell’ looks at voluntary euthanasia for a man with an age-related and incurable illness. This aging of characters reflects Jennifer’s journey towards maturity. Although she only ages about a year in the course of the collection, she grows from being a passive, childlike dreamer to becoming a confident individual and successful mother.

As I began to build the structure of *On Smith Street* it struck me as something akin to the way that the internet works with many possible paths through the pages and the stories. Accessing a single webpage provides a pathway to any number of other pages through hyperlinks, making our route through the pages in part random and in part predetermined. This connection between the structure of my book and the internet might be seen as, in part at least, causal. I had been studying ways of reading on the internet and experimenting with writing tools such as *HypeDyn* (which creates hypertext stories) and *Social Samba* (which creates *Facebook*-style stories), but as mentioned above, my initial inspiration for connecting my stories in this way came from a conversation I had with a friend, who was also a writer, which led me to a book, published in South Australia and which I read in print.

Finding a way to connect my stories – putting all the characters on the same street and discovering that they constituted a short story cycle – was one thing. However, finding ways to order these stories in a meaningful way was another challenge. With sixty-two stories, multiple characters and threads and connections woven throughout, it was not enough to randomly assign a house number and slot a story in. The ‘maturity’ theme mentioned above provided some scaffolding, but on

its own it also was not enough. Smith Street itself has three personalities: At one end are large, elegant homes built in the 1940s, in the middle are smaller, simpler dwellings built in the 1960s, and at the other end are small multi-storied units built by the Housing Trust in the 1970s. As this process of ordering the stories became more difficult to manage, I drew a map showing all the houses/stories. The map was longer than my hallway, and can be seen in part below.



Figure 1: Mapping Smith Street

That map ended up converted into a table of contents which shows the streets numbers of the houses in which the characters live are part of the chapter title:

Excerpt of Table of Contents from *On Smith Street*

Number 40: Secrets and Plane Trees...6

Number 10/2: How to Disappear Incompletely...7

Number 40: Smoke and Broccoli...10

Number 5/2: Hermit Crabs...	12
Number 4: Dear Diary...	16
Number 40: Patchwork...	19
Number 84: Sunlight Slippery Dip...	21
Number 1/2: Everything's Turning to White...	23
Number 19: Lia and Amos...	26
Number 40: Cat food and Snappyhappy Stories...	29
Number 7/1 Jesus and the Tsunami...	31
Number 16: Tim and Alice – The Rider...	34
Number 6/2: Housing Needs Assessment...	37
Number 8/1: Community Radio...	42

Figure 2: Example of Table of Contents from *On Smith Street*

According to McNamara, the process of sequencing a short story collection, ‘depends on the balance between familiarity and change, of fulfilling the reader’s desires, while also challenging them’, and the stories must work ‘in orchestration with the others to build a cumulative effect’. The first story in *On Smith Street*, ‘Secrets and Plane Trees’, serves to set the reader up with an understanding of the physical environment of the street (the cloying, cave-like effect of the Plane trees closing the street in) and juxtaposes this with the loneliness of one of the principle characters, Jennifer, who lives on the street with her husband and daughter, but is less than content. The intention was to prepare the reader for what is to come – the pervasive setting of the street is not laboured in the individual stories, so it was important to make a point of it in the opening – and Jennifer’s loneliness and isolation from her neighbours is one of the key themes of the collection.

From there it was harder to structure the collection in a way that, as McNamara says, both fulfils and challenges the reader. I knew I had to sprinkle Jennifer's stories in such a way that allowed the reader to stay connected with her while reading about other residents on the street. And it was essential to the theme of connection and community to end the collection with Maurice's attempts to bring the community together. In between these two bookends I attempted to find a balance between challenging the reader and leaving them satisfied and fulfilled. However, due to the number of characters in the collection there was the risk that the reader could not follow who was who. The street numbers in the story titles are there to remind readers that they are going back to the same house and characters. The numbers also allow readers to choose a pathway through the collection, other than the one I created.

More challenges from the print form

Ryan O'Neill's collection of stories *The Weight of a Human Heart* was also influential for me. O'Neill uses the following structures for short stories: a student's assignments (in 'English as a Foreign Language'), lists (in 'Seventeen Rules for Writing a Short Story'), a writing plan (in 'A Story in Writing'), timelines, charts, Venn diagrams, sketches, flowcharts and graphs (in 'Figures in a Marriage'), an exam paper (in 'The Examination'); and more. In a recent anthology, *Cracking the Spine* (2014), O'Neill wrote a story entirely from lines quoted from other Australian stories ('An Australian Short Story'). In an online experiment O'Neill contributed to 'Lost in Track Changes', a project undertaken by if:book in which five writers wrote a short memoir, which was then passed on to another writer in the group to transform into something else. The changes to the document are recorded and become part of the reading process.

Key to O'Neill's success is that he does not rely on tricks or gimmicks: his is poignant, emotive writing and each decision about form has been taken for a reason and is never 'experimentation for its own sake' (Russell). For example, in 'English as a Foreign Language' the protagonist is a refugee who is learning English in her new home country, and submitting assignments to her teacher. Gradually, as the assignments progress, her English improves, but more importantly, through each of the assignments we are given a piece of the patchwork that is her life. We learn of her manipulative, violent, cheating husband, of her dream to become a nurse, of the horror she endured as a refugee. By structuring the story as a series of assignments O'Neill creates a deeper illusion of authenticity in his writing: it is easier to believe the story because it *feels* less constructed. Our desire, as readers, for the artifice to be stripped away and the truth to be revealed to us is met more closely than if the story was told in, for example, third person objective, or even third person omniscient point of view. We can imagine that this set of assignments was real, although of course the process of writing and the reality of the artifice is no less intrusive than in conventional writing.

Walters says O'Neill's 'aim is to burrow into the medium to find fresh ways to tell stories' and Estelle Tang's sees O'Neill's experimentation as 'routes to sincere expression':

The playful approaches O'Neill adopts are all routes to revealing something about character, routes to sincere expression, that wouldn't be open without that novelty...In this age of compassion fatigue, where empathy is often lost amidst overfamiliar images and narratives, O'Neill's experimental approach brings new life and potential to how we might engage with the world around us and beyond.
n.pag.

After reading O'Neill's work I experimented more intensively with my own writing, and I approached O'Neill to be my mentor, a role which he agreed to take on. O'Neill proved to me that persuasive, powerful writing could break the rules, and if it was done well, it could make it infinitely better. From this experiment came the story in *On Smith Street* called 'Housing Needs Assessment'. This is the first story in the collection to feature Faraj, an Afghani refugee. Faraj's story is told through a housing needs assessment report written by a government housing officer. The story begins in a very formal, detached tone, but as the housing officer becomes more and more connected to Faraj, her tone changes. In the final act, the housing officer writes an imaginary report in which she envisions taking Faraj into her own home and nurturing him back to physical and emotional health. In structuring this story as a report, a layer of fictionalisation is stripped away and the story is brought into a more immediate, real space. Much like O'Neill's 'English as a Foreign Language', 'Housing Needs Assessment' removes the illusion of artifice from the short story form. It was my first attempt at burrowing into the form (Walters) and finding a route to sincere expression (Tang) and from it I gained the confidence to continue experimenting.

Burrowing into the digital world and finding purpose

As discussed in Chapter 1, I began writing with the idea that the short story is a malleable form that is suited to online publishing and that flash fiction worked well in this medium. I was intrigued by the idea that change was afoot: there was talk that postmodernism was being usurped, and digital publishing appeared to be changing reading at a swift rate. It was exciting to be writing on the cusp of such significant change and I wanted to engage with this. However, studying the digitisation of

writing has not led to me writing for digital delivery, rather it has meant engaging with the digital world in order to enhance my writing for the page. This has led me to develop a genuine respect for flash fiction, consider interconnectedness, think about sequencing, order, structure and the concept of ‘clicking through’ and experimentation with form. Through working with my mentor, Ryan O’Neill, I was encouraged to experiment with form, borrowing ideas from technology to write in new ways. O’Neill, in his extensive notes and feedback on my draft of *On Smith Street*, commented that, ‘I like the formal experiments you have done with a couple of stories, and would love to see more of that’ (*On Smith Street General Thoughts*, 2014).

One example of how I took O’Neill’s advice and experimented more is the story ‘Grandma’s Fruit Cake’ which was written as a flowchart. I allowed my protagonist to have two pathways through the story; a branching narrative without the benefit of hypertext links. The idea for this structure seemed to come at me from many directions, and at different times, until I finally sat down to write. I was in part inspired to write in this way by Jennifer Egan’s Powerpoint chapter ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses by Alison Blake’ in *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2011), but I was equally inspired by my experimentation with Hypertext fiction, which allows readers to choose a pathway through a story and affect different outcomes. Childhood memories of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series of books that my brother read voraciously were also in my mind.

‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses By Alison Blake’ (Egan 2011) is written entirely in PowerPoint. In this chapter Egan tells the story in an unconventional narrative form that loses none of its power, but rather enhances its emotional impact through the use of technique. Egan has said of this chapter:

But ultimately I realized that writing anything successful in PowerPoint requires that you break down a particular thought, or fictional moment, into its basic structure, and then illustrate that structure. I finally reached my true apotheosis as a PowerPointer when I began creating my own slide graphics out of shapes, rather than using templates.
Julavits 86

I also had my own moment of apotheosis in writing 'Grandma's Fruit Cake'. Initially I kept the story to one page, because I was concerned that the structure would not cohere over two or more pages. It soon became clear that this was an impossible task. The story I wanted to tell, of a young woman thinking about her maternal and fraternal grandmothers, remembering them through their cooking, did not want to fit onto one page. Additionally, the story did not seem to want to lodge itself into any place in the *On Smith Street* collection. Unlike the other stories I had written, this one did not seem to have a home. On reflection, the reason it did not work was because there was no real purpose for the story to be told in that form. Unlike Egan, whose chapter was written in an unconventional format for a reason (the slideshow technology fitted with a style of thinking and writing that the character, Alison Blake, would adopt), my story did not *need* to be told in this way. In fact the structure was detracting from what I wanted to achieve: trying to force the story onto one page meant that I did not allow it to breathe and develop. Just as Egan had to develop her own shapes and templates, I had to let the story grow and not be constricted by its form to allow it to work.

Wanting to pursue this experiment, I decided that the story needed an anchor in *On Smith Street* and I had to find a purpose for the narrative to be told in that way. By giving the young woman a grandmother who lived on Smith Street, I was able to find an anchor to the theme of the book. This allowed me to incorporate more of the

young woman into the story and uncover more about her character: an executive in a large corporation who often gave presentations involving flowcharts in order to persuade her clients. When it came time for her to make a difficult personal decision, it made sense that she would use this method: she would create a flowchart to help her make an important personal decision, and in the process, she would learn something about herself. The flowchart story, which I had deleted from the collection, now made sense and in its new revision, worked in *On Smith Street*.

Other experiments were influenced by less cutting-edge technology. Both the stories ‘Gaps Between Boxes’ and ‘Kind of Blue: Gloria’ were written as correspondence, one via email and one via letters and email. The emails between Gloria and Florence in ‘Kind of Blue: Gloria’ are written quite formally at first; I imagined these two elderly women writing in email as they would have done in a letter. They come from an era of letter-writing and although they have willingly taken on email for their correspondence they still write using formality that they would have used in their letters. The formality drops away when Gloria reveals she is dying: time is precious then and there is no place for formality.

HypeDyn – finding a narrative pathway from experimental hypertext fiction and print fiction

Digital publishing offers many opportunities for innovation in writing – from incorporating hyperlinks within stories, to using images, to multiple authoring, to podcasting with music and sound effects, and to writing within tight word counts that suit portable devices such as mobile phones, and beyond. Online stories can hybridise genres: they can borrow from video games, business documents, websites, social media, film and other media. They can use images, sound, movement and graphics. The screen forces the question: what does the page offer? The internet

seems to say that the page, with its straight lines like bars on gaol cells, was a prison from which writers could choose to emerge. And yet, digital natives say that they prefer to read in print (Rosenwald). Much like Egan, O'Neill and Allen's print stories, online forms challenge the notion of conventional narrative. Hypertext fiction allows readers to create their own narrative path, and interactive fiction (IF) takes this notion further by incorporating visual and gaming elements. Hypertext fiction uses hyperlinks embedded into the text to allow the reader to decide how the story progresses. The reader therefore participates in the construction of the story by choosing things such as which room to enter, which character to call and ask for help, which road to take (literally and figuratively).

I was interested to see how working with hypertext fiction would influence my writing. HypeDyn is a hypertext fiction editor developed by the University of Singapore which allows writers to create hypertext fiction without any knowledge of HTML. The writer creates a series of nodes which contain fragments of text, links between those nodes, and rules about how links can be used. The creators of HypeDyn provide three tutorials to teach the basics as well as the more complicated ways in which rules can be made. Initially I wrote simple experimental stories in HypeDyn and allowed the tool to lead me. I found myself searching for opportunities to branch the narrative out, looking for places I could insert hyperlinks, looking for ways to make the most of the *tool*, rather than make the most of the *story*. I suspect this is a novices' trap: with more experience I would have learned to serve the story rather than the tool, but certainly my initial experiments proved frustrating and futile: just as I learned that the narrative device must have purpose when experimenting with form in print stories, I learned that hypertext linking for the sake of it does not facilitate good writing. There must be a purpose, and that purpose must feed the interests of the story.

Because this process was producing empty, pointless stories, I decided to think about whether HypeDyn could offer ways to deepen the stories that I had already written for the collection: was it possible to transfer already written stories into HypeDyn and see if it enhanced the stories in any way? I began this process by working with some of the longer stories. For example, Tim and Alice's series of stories, while clearly very linear and without a branching narrative structure, was constructed in clearly defined sections that marked the different points in their relationship. As was Jennifer's story. I entered these stories, along with some stand-alone stories, into HypeDyn and connected them. It was now possible for the reader to decide whether to continue reading about Tim and Alice in a seamless stream, or whether to skip ahead to an unrelated story, or whether to drop that storyline altogether. The result was not a branching narrative so much as a linear narrative that offered points at which the reader could skip ahead. It was not a case of offering the reader 'sliding doors' which would alter the outcome of the story for the character – the denouement would always be the same. This was a revealing process for me as a writer. It made me realise that I did not *want* to offer the reader the opportunity to determine the outcome. It felt like it was my job to decide what became of Tim, Alice and Jennifer. However, what it did do was allow me to think about the stories in different ways: rather than imagining that the reader would pick up my collection, start at page one and keep reading until they reached the end, I could imagine the reader choosing their own pathway through the stories.

Although this was critical to my thinking process about how I would structure *On Smith Street*, it was also clear to me that the reading experience of HypeDyn was unsatisfying. Much like the subjects in Petrelli and Wright's study (discussed in Chapter 1), I found that the experience of reading my stories in HypeDyn left me feeling lost and uncertain. Reading from the screen meant that I was not holding

something solid in my hand, something that made sense as a piece of work, a cohesive artefact that I understood. Reading from the screen denies the reader this grounding experience. Not only that, but HypeDyn did not generate a story map so it was impossible to locate myself within the narrative. If I chose to follow Tim's story now, did that mean I was unable to return to Alice? How would I navigate back to her? What if I wanted to skip Tim and Alice altogether? Did that mean that I missed a critical element that was necessary for understanding Jennifer's story? Or Faraj's, or Maurice's? There were too many questions that unsettled me as a reader, and I kept returning to the idea that *if I was holding a book, these answers would be right in front of my eyes*: I could glance at the Table of Contents and know. I could flick through the pages and instinctively understand. Reading in HypeDyn, however, felt as though I was missing out on an essential element. That essential element was the author's intention, or overall plan. As a writer it mattered to me, but it also mattered as a reader. I wanted to be taken on a journey, given a map for that journey, and then – critically – left to my own devices to interpret the precise meaning of that journey.

While my experimentation with HypeDyn proved to me that hypertext fiction was frustrating to me as both a reader and a writer, it also showed me what was possible with a print version of my stories. I could apply the idea of connecting the stories and creating links between characters and stories, but do it in such a way that a reader would always have a map in front of them (in the form of a solid book with a Table of Contents) and, hopefully, would never feel lost. With this in mind, I re-examined my stories and discovered that there were opportunities available to me to apply the lessons of my HypeDyn experience. I split some longer stories, for example Tim and Alice's stories, so that I could sprinkle them throughout the collection. Rather than have a very large, almost novella-sized story sitting in amongst many shorter stories and flash fiction, it made sense to split these stories and

allow them to build over the length of the collection. Doing this had several benefits: it balanced the overall length of the stories; it allowed me to create narrative threads that had an almost novelistic feel and created a more cohesive collection; it allowed me to see that, if properly signposted, the reader could still make choices about how they read the text.

In addition to finding ways to split stories, I began to look at ways to grow other stories. Jennifer's story was pivotal: it underpinned the larger narrative about the importance of self-awareness and belonging. Jennifer's story needed additional development, and this new structure provided space for this: it gave me the opportunity to expand her stories and give them depth.

Similarly, Faraj did not have the depth of voice that he needed. Faraj was a character who felt deeply important. He too was an illustration of the significance of home and family and connection to place. Faraj, a young man, orphan and refugee who had fallen through the cracks of government systems, felt at once alien to me as an individual and also critically central to my themes. I had been reluctant to write more stories about him because I felt my lack of knowledge of Afghanistan, the complexities of its ethnic and religious groups, the ongoing war and persecution in Afghanistan, not to mention the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder, would lead to me writing an ignorant, shallow story about something that I felt was deeply important. As *On Smith Street* progressed and became a coherent collection, this gap seemed to loom larger and larger. It was the missing piece of the puzzle that needed to be addressed. In order to ease into this process, I allowed Faraj to pop up in other stories. This felt satisfying: it increased both the sense of connection and disconnection that I wanted to portray. Faraj was part of the Smith Street community – neighbours knew him and greeted him – but he was also completely separate from

it. Nobody really cared about him or looked out for him or knew anything about him beyond his first name and the permanently sad expression on his face.

After peppering the collection with these small moments and becoming more confident with Faraj as a character, it became clear that Faraj needed his own defining moment. Without it, the other stories in the collection would not mean as much. Faraj added depth and made the whole cohesive: through his complete lack of connection to community and people in general, the absolute *vacuum* of his existence, I could tell the real story I was trying to tell – that nothing was more important than having a place and people who mattered to you, nothing was more important than belonging. And the best way to tell *this* story in Australia was through an acknowledgement of the shameful, painful and tragic story of the dislocation and genocide of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, who are still enduring the catastrophic consequences of having their place and culture taken away from them. As a non-Indigenous writer, this process of representation needed to be respected too; it was important to write this scene in a knowledgeable and sensitive way. In order to achieve this I consulted the *Australia Council for the Arts protocols for writing Indigenous stories*.

I have strayed a long distance from hypertext fiction. What is relevant here is the journey my experiment with hypertext took me on: away from a group of stories that were not connected and not cohesive and towards an experiment that led to not only a cohesive and meaningful structure, but to enhancing the depth of the stories within that structure, and consequently a deeper engagement with the themes I was exploring. There were two processes that propelled me on this journey: close reading in print, and digital experimentation. Both happened simultaneously and separately and the processes are so intertwined in my memory that it is difficult to remember precisely how each moment of development occurred.

Flash fiction in *On Smith Street*

With countless websites publishing flash fiction, publishers getting on board with small flash collections (*Captives* by Angela Meyer, *Small Wonder* by Linda Godfrey and Julie Chevalier, eds. and *Anthropology* by Dan Rhodes, to name a few) and flash fiction writing courses popping up at writers centres, it seems that flash fiction is gaining in momentum and popularity. The idea that it suits our fast-paced, digitally connected lives and is ideal for reading in brief snippets on hand held devices is one that is popular, but I would argue that there is more to it than that.

Flash fiction is very short fiction, usually under 1000 words in length (for a more complete definition, refer to Chapter 1). Although it is not new (Ernest Hemingway is often quoted as a writer of very short fiction) it was James Thomas who coined the term flash fiction in his 1992 collection of short short stories, *Flash Fiction*. In his introduction, Thomas says:

Like all fiction that matters...[short stories] success depends not on their length but on their depth, their clarity of vision, their human significance – the extent to which the reader is able to recognize in them the real stuff of real life.

Thomas 12

I found the field of flash fiction productive. The idea that a complete story could be told in under 1000 words seemed to make sense to me; after all, I had always preferred to read short fiction. Growing up, I remember my grandmother proudly proclaiming (often) that she would not waste her time reading anything under 700 pages in length. To her, if it was shorter than 700 pages it was not worthy of her time. By contrast, flash fiction author Vanessa Gebbie says, ‘You just don’t find

diamonds the size of boulders' (54). To me, flash fiction stories are diamonds. Their brevity is their sparkle, their conciseness their value. I had already been writing very short stories, but now I had a name for them, and I had recognition that they were a valid form of story, not just a shortcut by a lazy writer. I sought to enhance my flash fiction pieces, and used them in *On Smith Street* to provide relief from the more complex themes (while at the same time supporting those themes) and also to add the variety that I knew was needed to flesh out the streetscape that was Smith Street. To me, many of the flash fiction stories in *On Smith Street* are fillers, but in the best sense of the word: they fill spaces, but they also bind. Stories like 'I Go to Rio', 'Lists', 'Dear Diary', 'Sunlight Slippery Dip' and 'He Said/She Said', among others, are important in lightening the often sombre mood of many of the other stories and giving the reader a breather from their intensity, but also in creating a more realistic, vital and broad picture of life on the street.

Working in flash fiction was not so much an experiment for me as a finding my own home as a writer: it was a form I was already working in, however, investigating the form allowed me to feel free to create it and recognise its value.

Connection and hope *On Smith Street*

My initial speculation about how the internet was impacting reading and writing was based around the idea that readers are looking for shorter reading experiences because their lives are fast-paced and click-based. Instead it emerged that the internet is teaching us to look for and *expect* connection. *Logical* connections are expected, but we also expect to connect disparate things and ideas. It is no accident that young people use the word 'random' so regularly in daily life to refer to something unexpected that it has become standard lexicon – to this group of digital natives

'random' connections happen all the time. The nature of clicking hyperlinks and following sometimes random pathways through information and narrative and content is training us to link ideas. In this sense, *On Smith Street* does something similar to Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*: it creates an interconnected web of ideas and relationships that, if mapped, would look something like a map of a large website. In an interview with Jennifer Egan, Julavits noted that the structure of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is:

...a relevant form of interconnectivity, since it mimics how our curiosity fires these days. It's like Googling, where you are on one site and a marginal mention catches your interest, say a mention of Bennie Salazar, so you plug him in and boom you fork off into this dedicated Bennie Salazar space.

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All stories (or internet pages) spring from a central point (Smith Street for *On Smith Street* and Bennie and Sasha for *A Visit from the Goon Squad*) but branch out into other places. Some stories float with just that one connection point, but many others are connected by interactions that cross boundaries of generation, culture, gender and class. They hitch onto each other, not unlike external links between webpages.

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, narrators are interwoven, lives overlap and the reader learns as much about a character from the other characters' stories as from the character itself. Blogger Tessie Girl created this map (below) showing the interconnectedness of Egan's characters. Although the main protagonist's name is misspelt (Benny should be Bennie), it is otherwise a helpful tool.

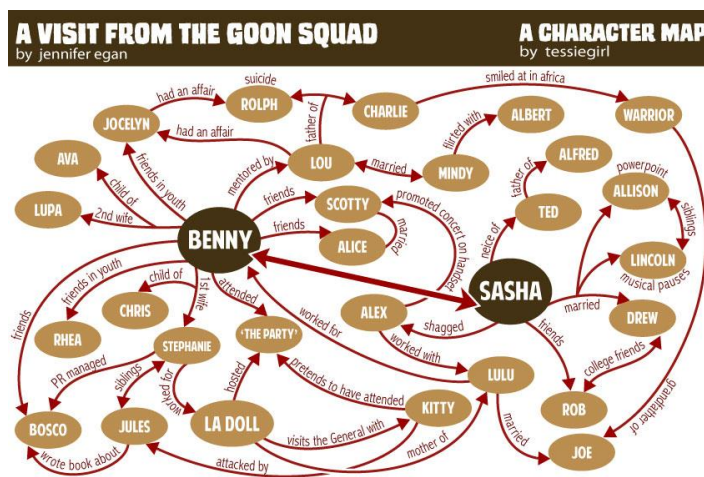


Figure 4: Tessie Girl’s ‘A Visit from the Goon Squad Character Map’

This map also illustrates that *A Visit from the Goon Squad* challenges postmodernism ideas of disunity and fragmentation. Everything and everyone is connected by one or more thread and one of fundamental premises of the book is capturing the moments where lives intersect; where people are connected. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* sits somewhere in between two worlds, as a short story collection slash novel, it denies form (appearing at first glance to be a swarm of disconnected characters and events, and then revealing itself to be a web of connections) and simultaneously searching for meaning and unity (connecting people and their stories intricately). It oscillates between fragmentation and connection. As an examination of the networked, connected age it finds overwhelmingly in the negative, but there are glimmers of hope too.

Much like *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, *On Smith Street* has many characters who only appear once and do not have any obvious connection to other stories or characters in the collection, aside from where they live. But, characters like Florence, Tim, Alice, Faraj, Maurice and of course the central protagonist Jennifer, all reappear and connect, eventually coming together to create a meaningful community. As I wrote character after character in short story after short story, I was searching for

many things. I was searching to express ideas I had about belonging, fear, home and love. But there were bigger, overarching ideas at play, too. All my characters were searching for connection in some way, whether it was physical, emotional or spiritual. But, somewhat ironically, I had set my characters adrift in a short story collection that had no sense of collectiveness – the stories and characters were disconnected and thrown together in a failed attempt to artificially create cohesion.

After creating the Smith Street-scape, it made sense that all these disparate personalities could co-exist in a place as small as a street and barely know each other. Suburban streets, those that I know now and those that I grew up in, are characterised by the shutting out of neighbours – with high fences, thorny rose bushes, solid brick walls. All through my childhood, and to this day, my father makes a point of standing on his front lawn, watering hose in hand, engaging passers-by in conversation. These were my neighbours, and I did not recognise their faces, know their names or which house they would disappear into, but Dad did. He knew because he stood out in the front yard and talked to people. But even then and more so now, he is the exception, the anomaly. I know only a few of my neighbours, even after having lived on the same street for twelve years. Most of them are hidden behind six-foot high brush fences or automatic sliding gates, despite the fact that we live in an extremely safe neighbourhood. Most of them only venture out of their front door for a quick trip to the letterbox, to put the bins out, or to jump straight in their cars. No one stands on their front lawn, hose in hand, waiting for a conversation. Some suburbs, it seems to me, are designed for the illusion of community and the reality of isolation.

These experiences from childhood and adulthood caused me to think deeply about my characters – Jennifer, Faraj, Tim, Becca, Maurice and all the others – living on Smith Street. I gave their street a generic name, a name so bland that it could be

anywhere or everywhere, and then I hemmed them into their street with trees overhanging their houses and footpaths: pollinated branches locking them in overhead and roots locking them in below. I imprisoned them in this small, allergic world and *still* they refused to talk to each other. Their lives continued in their houses and flats and they never reached out to one another, unless it was to be a busybody.

Very late in my writing process it occurred to me that the character Maurice was not quite complete. There were aspects of his character that did not add up. For example, he had a daughter, but where was she? She was a shadow in the story and it did not make sense: he supposedly loved her. Why did he not talk to her, or at least *think* about her? In considering the flaws in my characterisation of Maurice, he began to morph. I brought his daughter into the story and suddenly he was more than just a washed up old muso looking to rekindle his youth. He became a father figure with a deep sense of compassion. Then it seemed possible that Maurice could bring them *all* together: he could be the guy standing out on front lawn with a hose in his hand. And that is precisely what Maurice did, only his hose was a drum kit.

Themes began to emerge of loss and abandonment, isolation and connection, travel and home, hope and renewal, family and friendship. It seemed that the residents on Smith Street had a shared commonality, but it took me putting them together and then forcing them into each other's lives for their common humanity to emerge. It took Maurice to make that happen. Their commonality emerged as an intricate web of relationships, conceived in isolation but brought together through sometimes tenuous connections which only seemed to matter when they were cemented by geography. Before connecting them, they floated and drifted and if there was one thing I knew about Smith Street it was that it needed a big heart. After connecting the stories and characters they had context, meaning and relevance. They informed each other, sustained each other and they made sense.

With a structure now, and a collection that *collected* rather than dispersed, the entire project had meaning. I could see how the location added significance to the text: these characters were either rooted to the spot and feeling imprisoned by their physical environment, or fleeing the sense of imprisonment caused by this environment, or in the case of Faraj, floating, unable to leave or stay. As mentioned earlier, at the point at which I discovered a sense of cohesion in the stories, Faraj had only been in one story ('Housing Needs Assessment'). I had always wanted him to be more than that, but I had hesitated about writing a character so far removed from my own experiences (social, physical, psychological and cultural). But I also knew that he was important and needed more time. He represented a flip side to the other Smith Street residents. He was rootless, homeless, scared and alone. He had no meaningful connections with anyone: he was an orphan and a refugee. Faraj was an opportunity to make a political statement about the treatment of refugees in Australia at the time of writing, but he also served another purpose: a counterpoint to the Smith Street residents' point of view. Faraj showed that without connection, a person is empty and lost.

Faraj began to find a connection to place when he met a small group of Aboriginal people in the city fringe parklands (also a kind of no-person's-land, a place where people assemble but are not allowed to cohere), but he also found a connection through Maurice, who ultimately brings the entire Smith Street community, including Faraj, together. It is Maurice who shows that the 'prison cell' of the Smith Street Plane trees need not be oppressive, and it is through Faraj that the reader can see the true value of community and connection.

In pulling together the chapters that make up *A Visit from the Goon Squad* Egan had a similar experience of starting with disparate pieces and finding a way for

them to make sense through a single story. For her, the chapters that eventually became a book did not start as a planned exercise. She has said:

If I had been telling myself I was writing a novel I couldn't have done a damn thing. I would have had to just stop because I knew this did not meet even my own definitions of what a novel is, in terms of providing some sort of centrality. I wanted to avoid centrality. I wanted polyphony. I wanted a lateral feeling, not a forward feeling. My ground rules were: every piece has to be very different, from a different point of view.
Julavits 83-84

Early on in the process Egan had written four stories, and of them she said, 'I had no sense that they were linked up at all. And then I started working on "Found Objects" and it all kind of followed from there in a strange way' (Julavits, 84). This is very similar to how my stories came together in the sense that I did not know that they would really work as a collection until the moment that Maurice pulled them all together. I forced a geographical connection onto the characters, but it was not until I deepened the characters and developed their stories that it all began to make sense.

As I began the lengthy process of pulling the stories into a cohesive shape, I found connections I did not know were there. Egan talks about the moments where she found connections between characters that she had not known were there:

And then I found myself having this weird sensation, as if the stories were putting out tendrils and attaching to each other. One of the great moments, for me, was realizing Sasha, from "Found Objects" was the same person as the protagonist of "Good-bye My Love". I couldn't believe I had written two stories about women who steal wallets without realizing they were one person.
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Connection as an idea is not at odds with the digital world. As mentioned previously,

the internet is a web of connections – some meaningful, some random and still meaningful, others meaningless. Digitisation has created opportunities for connection that have never been available before, whether that be through chat groups, Facebook pages, Skype, websites, SnapChat or any of the other myriad ways people can communicate digitally. Postmodernists draw meaning by connecting ideas, through pastiche and contextualisation, and it seemed all throughout the writing of *On Smith Street* that I was writing in the midst of a tension between postmodernism and what comes next – post-postmodernism in whatever guise that turns out to be. As discussed in Chapter 2, academics have been debating ‘what comes next’ since the 1990s and several theories are emerging. I connected with the ideas of digimodernism to some degree, but this was clearly not the answer: for a collection that was in search of hope and connection, digimodernism felt far too cynical and sour. It mattered that the ending of *On Smith Street* was not desolate. Jennifer needed to learn something about herself; Faraj needed to find an advocate and protector; Maurice needed to find purpose in his life again; Tim and Alice needed to wrench themselves from each other’s lives. Status quo would have felt too disheartening and pointless. Hope was essential, even if resolution was impossible. An oscillation between the knowingness of postmodernism and a desire for something more sentimental seemed to be where *On Smith Street* sat, in the push and pull between awareness and optimism.

The stories in *On Smith Street* oscillate between a search for personal truth and an acknowledgement that our own ideas of personal truth are flawed. Jennifer is on a quest for her personal truth. She is unhappily married and struggling with being a new mother. She thinks back to simpler times, when she was in love but also fearful and insecure. She is convinced that she has made an enormous mistake in marrying Dan and that her destiny was with another man, Alexander. Jennifer and Alexander are intensely connected by childhood experiences (again, related to home

and belonging) and shared regrets. Eventually Jennifer decides she must take a risk: she has to find out if she was meant to be with Alexander, and so she has an affair with him. But what Jennifer learns from this experience is that the past is as much of a mirage as the future. Her memories are just that, memories, and she cannot bring the past into her future. Alexander was not the answer to her problems, and life is not as simple as that: she cannot simply switch partners and become happy. There is no such thing as divine destiny. The personal truth (destiny) Jennifer had pinned her fantasies and memories on was a mirage, one that she invented in order to allow herself to act on a deep regret. Jennifer does find her personal truth in the end: it just was not the one she was expecting. Her happiness comes to her from an unexpected place. After her brief affair with Alexander it is clear to her that he is not the answer – he was a distraction from the real truth, which was that she had to face the mistake of her marriage head on. When she does this, she learns that it is okay to be alone.

There is a mixture of hope and melancholy in this narrative arc, as well as an acknowledgement of the fickleness and frailty of personal truth. Readers understand Jennifer's mistake before she does, but hopefully also understand her need to follow this path. Readers can sense Jennifer's sadness at the breakdown of her marriage but understand it is necessary in order for her to move on. Jennifer's naivety becomes knowingness through a complex process – what she imagined to be knowingness (her love for Alexander) was in fact her ultimate naivety.

While I believe that *On Smith Street* sits in the cusp of something post-postmodern, this was not what I sought to achieve. I wrote naively in the first instance and then through a deeply reflective process sought to develop the text. Orhan Pamuk says that the writer must oscillate between a naïve and reflective process. In the naïve state, the writer does not question their choices, they simply write, assuming that their 'utterances, words, verse will portray the general

landscape, that they will represent it, that they will adequately and thoroughly describe and reveal the meaning of the world – since this meaning is neither distant not concealed from him (sic)’ (15). Then, however, the writer must apply reflective practices in which:

...the ‘sentimental’ (emotional, reflective) poet is uneasy, above all, in one respect: he is unsure whether his words will encompass reality, whether they will attain it, whether his utterances will convey the meaning he intends. So he is exceedingly aware of the poem he writes, the methods and techniques he uses, and the artifice involved in his endeavour
Pamuk 15-16

For Pamuk, ‘Being a novelist is the art of being both naïve and reflective at the same time’ (13) and he describes this as an ‘oscillation’ between the two states (17). This makes sense to me as a writer and as a human being. I oscillate between trusting my instinct, and analysing that gut reaction, and I know that there must be a balance between these two things. Postmodernism taught us that ideas must be challenged and dismantled in order to be understood, but there is an opportunity to move forward from this idea: postmodernism cannot be the end of cultural theory. Writers can afford to oscillate between the search for truth and the knowingness that comes with understanding the inherent dangers within the concept of truth; its ability to demonise, exclude and persecute. We can seek honesty in our work without attempting to apply the truths we find *carte blanche*. We can exist in the in between.

During my research and writing process I realised that I prefer to read on paper, and that the digital technologies I was investigating (for example *HypeDyn* and *Social Samba*) were not where my writer’s heart lay. I had swung the pendulum too far away from my equilibrium, and I needed it to swing back. But as I swung

back, I retained some of the lessons of the screen – I took them with me into my writing for the page so that I could exist in between the screen and the page.

Conclusion

Terry Eagleton has shown that literature is not static; it changes with the surrounding circumstances of its production. More specifically, Ian Reid has shown that the short story has changed according to the time and place within which it is produced. From this it is reasonable to assume that the digitisation of reading and writing will influence the written work that is produced today. Research has begun to engage with the idea that the way we read is changing, but less so with the idea that the way we write is changing. By exploring digital writing tools, techniques and processes it is possible to gain an understanding of the ways in which digital technologies might influence the way writers write.

In my first chapter I briefly examined the history of literature and short stories in order to establish the malleability of the form. I then went on to examine some of the changes that have been observed in the publishing industry and in reading styles since computers became ubiquitous in affluent, developed countries, in order to illustrate the changing nature of the digital writing and publishing playing fields. This led into a discussion of the ways in which writers are engaging with digital writing. Because in my own creative practice I explored hypertext fiction, interactive fiction and flash fiction, I chose to explore these three modes from the point of view of the author's role. From this I was able to deduce that the role of the digital author is different to that of the pre-digital author, but perhaps not quite to the extent that we might think. Readers still enjoy certain fictional tropes: they like to be led by an author's vision for the story; they like to have an understanding of the scope of the story they are engaging with; they like authenticity and hope. One notable change is an increasing desire for non-linear narratives.

In my second chapter I investigated the idea that postmodernism is being challenged by digitisation. In Kirby's exploration of this he proposes that

postmodernism is being usurped by digimodernism. While Kirby's digimodern tropes are interesting and somewhat illuminating, when held up against digimodern modes of production, such as Social Samba, Smashwords and websites such as *The Jew's Daughter*, it is possible to see that Kirby is extrapolating from a standpoint that emerges from being not fully articulate with digital reading practices. He fails to see the degree and depth of engagement that can be achieved between readers and writers in the digital landscape and his cynicism means that he cannot see the sincerity and positivity that is achievable.

In my final chapter I discussed my writing process, drawing on lessons learned from the print form as well as experimenting with digital writing tools such as HypDyn and genres such as flash fiction. In flash fiction is perhaps a key: it is a style of storytelling that is equally at home on the page and online. My own process was signposted with points of crossover between the page and the screen; inspired in equal parts by face-to-face conversations, print reading, digital experiments and a mentorship conducted via email. It is in this crossover space, this place of oscillation between old and new, known and unknown, familiar and challenging that a comfortable and productive writing space arose. And in this comfortable and broadly defined space, characterised by an openness and willingness to experiment with something new and unknown, I was able to develop much needed depth and meaning in my stories, as well as find ways to connect them in order to generate greater significance.

The research makes it clear that we are in a time of significant cultural change. Digitisation is changing not only the way we read, but also the way we write, interact, socialise, communicate, work. The impacts of these changes are yet to be fully understood, and they continue to evolve. However, consistent within this change is the deeply human need for connection, communication, authenticity and

personal truth. Kirby has attempted to categorise and understand this change, however his work is but an entry point into a field that requires a great deal more engagement. There is still much work to be done. For example, other emerging post-postmodern theories could be examined within this framework of digital writing (and reading) to determine if they go further towards developing an understanding of the changing role of the writer. In addition, it would be valuable to undertake an analysis of how other writers are engaging with digital practices to determine the degree to which they are influenced by technology.

There is a pleasing enthusiasm for short stories in the digital framework: they suit digital technologies, and especially in their capacity to adapt and change with social conditions it is possible to see many ways short stories and collections of stories will continue to evolve and thrive. As new tools emerge, so will new ways to tell stories. This is also fertile ground for further study.

I would hope that short stories will always remain on the paper page, but they need not be limited to one publication method. The technologies that brought us hypertext fiction, interactive fiction, *Social Samba* and other digital storytelling tools, will continue to develop and bring us new ways to tell stories. As this happens, I hope that short stories will continue to hold onto the Romantic notion that short fiction should tell the stories of the under-represented, the disenfranchised, the aliens and the people who Ian Reid calls the ‘one or two individuals who are seen as separated from their fellow-men in some way, at odds with social norms, beyond the pale’. (27)

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