

LITERATURE IN CYBERSPACE¹

Piret Viires

Abstract

Contemporary society has become an information society and hence it makes sense to interpret various changes in the cultural sphere. Connections between computer technology and literature are one aspect of the complicated global set of problems in tackling the adaptation of texts with the media. The article focuses on what happens with literary texts in cyberspace, how they adapt to that environment, and it examines the forms of “cyberliterature”. The most comprehensive definition of cyberliterature derives from the concept of digital literature, i.e. literature created on the computer and presented by means of the computer. Trying to narrow the concept of cyberliterature, it can be characterised by certain computer-specific qualities: multi-linearity, different parts of hypertexts connected by links, uniting the written text with multimedia, interactivity etc. The second part of the article analyses a specific sub-category, one of the most intriguing border areas of cyberliterature – fanfiction. Fanfiction signifies texts mainly created as ‘pseudo-sequels’ to a book, comic strip, TV-series or film, and that are not written by professional authors but by fans. A separate section of fanfiction consists of texts written by aficionados of a pop or rock group – this is the case of “real person fiction”.

Cyberliterature is part of a larger set of problems, the most general background of which is the increasing role of technology in our society. Other factors include the myriad opportunities that characterise the postmodernist cultural situation, the expansion of the concept of literature and the emergence of new forms of literature.

Keywords: cyberspace, digital literature, fanfiction, postmodernism, technology and literature.

Global changes in the world form the general background of this article. Modern society has advanced into an information or communication society, and this change has necessitated the reconceptualisation of progress in the cultural sphere. New forms synthesising different means of expression have emerged next to traditional forms also in literature.

The interrelation of computer technology and literature constitutes one aspect of this intricate and novel set of issues. Virtual space generated by computer network functions here as a new medium. This article attempts to focus on the question as to what happens to literary texts in cyberspace, and how they adapt in the environment, and follows the author’s earlier studies into cyberliterature and the related problems (see Viires 2001, 2002).

Cyberliterature: definition and study

The most comprehensive definition of cyberliterature would proceed from the concept of digital literature – namely, literature created and presented by means of computer (presented mostly in WWW, but also on a CD or on a computer hard drive). In narrower terms, the concept of cyberliterature can be characterised by certain computer-specific qualities: multilinearity, lexias (blocks of text connected with various hypertext links) joined by links, linking a written text with multi-media, interactivity, etc. In the English language a parallel term *hypertext literature* has been used. In the Estonian language, however, the most apposite term would be *küberkirjandus*, which indicates to the phenomenon's connection with technology, cyberspace, while avoiding the limiting of different forms of computer literature with the requirement of hypertextuality, and has a wider meaning.

Cyberliterature could therefore serve as an umbrella term which could tentatively be divided in three:

- (i) All literary texts available in the Internet (WWW). This term covers prose or poetry texts available at the home pages of professional writers; anthologies of prose or poetry published and digitised; collections of classical texts (e.g. Project Gutenberg²); online literature magazines (e.g. Ninniku³), etc.
- (ii) Non-professional literary texts available at the Internet, which inclusion in literary analysis expands the boundaries of traditional literature. Here the net functions first and foremost as an independent place of publication. The term would cover home pages of amateur writers, groups of unrecognised young authors and their portals (e.g. *Kloaak*⁴). Here we might also include peripheries of literature, such as fanfiction or blogs describing people's daily life, also text-based role-playing games and collective online novels.
- (iii) Hypertext literature and cybertexts. These would include literary texts of more complex structure, which exploit various hypertext solutions, but also intricate multimedia cybertexts. Such cybertexts would be the most authentic

example of multimedia artefacts, merging literature, visual arts, film, music.

Academic discourse over cyberliterature has been relatively active since the late 1980s (the first conference on hypertext was held in 1987, see Koskimaa 2000) and shows no signs of fading. There are no common views in regard to cyberliterature, as it is a set of complicated issues which transgresses the established boundaries of literary theory and results in refined theoretical constructions. The discourse comprises arguments for and against by people in favour of cyberliterature to those vehemently opposed to it. Regardless of that, all parties agree that the spread of computer technology has brought along the need to make certain amendments in the study of the humanities. A new phenomenon – cyberliterature – has emerged and many authors use this complex and versatile genre. In addition to ordinary hypertext processing programs, those created for writing cyberliterature (hypertext poetry or prose, such as *Intermedia*, *Storyspace*) and also literature written with these programs can be ordered from the Internet. The largest portal mediating these programs and cyberliterature is Eastgate Systems.⁵

Hypertext or cybertext?

One of the leading theoreticians of cyberliterature is George P. Landow who has published monumental works *Hypertext. The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Landow 1992) and *Hypertext 2.0. The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Landow 1997). He has considered the technologies that open new horizons in literary and cultural theory as revolutionary, and has stated, among other things, that computer technology and cyberliterature, at last, enable to put things described by poststructuralist and deconstructivist theories into practice, and has concluded that the experience of reading a hypertext opens up several important ideas in poststructuralist literary theory. According to Landow, Roland Barthes' ideal text has been materialised in hypertext and the ideas by J. Derrida, M. Bakhtin and M. Riffaterre have been expressed in hypertext. To illustrate this point I will present Landow's view, which has been referred to in several previous works (Viires 2001: 232; 2002: 1237; Laak 2001: 124):

In S/Z, Roland Barthes describes an ideal textuality that precisely matches that which has come to be called computer hypertext – text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms link, node, network, web, and path (Landow 1997: 2).

Such an optimistic view has triggered scepticism from other authors studying the field. For example, in an interview to Markku Eskelinen and Raine Koskimaa, Brian McHale has expressed doubts about Landow's views, considering the latter too simplifying (McHale 2001). Among the reasons for his doubts is also the rapid advancement of technology, resulting in the invalidity of arguments built upon a computer program's limits in a few years' time. Marin Laak has reached the same conclusion (see Laak 2005).

Thus, the entire conflict between hypertext and cybertext theory (the main representative of which is Espen Aarseth, see below) becomes evident first and foremost in the context of technological progress. While the hypertext literature created in the late 1980s and early 1990s was primarily text-based and was characterised by linking various blocks of texts together, modern hypertext literature exists more commonly in the form of complicated multimedia works combining written texts with video clips, works of music, media art. Approaching these with an ordinary hypertext theory yields limited results, thus Espen Aarseth and other representatives of his school have used the concept of cybertext for the analysis.

Expanding the context and observation of the relation of cyberliterature with, say, postmodernism is hindered by one aspect – namely, favouring technology, the positive attitude towards technological advances has been most characteristic of modernism, whereas postmodernism has generally been opposed to new technologies. Therein lies a paradox, of course, as is demonstrated by the case of William Burroughs, who as a postmodernist author was still fascinated by new technologies (cf. McHale 2001: 71). Similar paradoxes cover the entire cyberliterature, where elements characteristic of postmodernist writing (e.g. text endings are omitted, the texts lack concrete structure, opening and end,

or are circular in that the end refers to the beginning; fragmentariness, eclecticism, intertextuality, obscuration and disappearance of genre limits; also, labyrinth, a key concept of postmodernism is characteristic of cyberliterature) are embedded in texts and presented by means of technological (and postmodernist, in contents) solutions. The discussion about postmodernism and cyberliterature should proceed from the views of Markku Eskelinen, who argues that cyberliterature stands outside the entire postmodernism-modernism discourse. Relying on Brian McHale's opposition of epistemological (modernist) and ontological (postmodernist) literature (McHale 1987), Eskelinen has noticed that the lines of epistemological and ontological literature also run through cyberliterature. Cyberliterature includes representatives of either type, and the specific medium used for presenting the text is not relevant in this context (see Eskelinen 2001, 2002).

Reader of cyberliterature and time

Yet another paradoxical view is the argument "a reader becomes an author". A work of cyberliterature presented as a hypertext would be first and foremost characterised by links connecting blocks of texts. A reader follows these links and makes choices. Such active reading has been commonly called "interactive reading", arguing that this way the reader becomes an author. At the same time these links have been intentionally and purposefully created by the original author. As Tim Parks has noted in his article *Tales Told by the Computer* (2002), which discusses classical cyberliterature texts such as Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and Stuart Moulthrop's *Hegirascope*, these links, in fact, impose limitations during the reading. A reader still follows the path created by the author, even though there may be more than one simultaneous paths to choose from. Although different readers do not probably read these paths in the same order, the reading is still determined by the author. A reader cannot go beyond the paths pointed out by the author. According to Parks, "But to say that this [making a choice between links – P.V.] makes me a co-writer, to the same extent as the author who prepared the texts and decided what links would be available to me, where, and when, is absurd. I have written nothing." (Parks 2002). Thus, Parks argues that traditional literature in the form of books pro-

vide the reader much more freedom, as during reading a reader's imagination can move along quite different paths than proposed by the author, and can also put down his or her notes or comments on margins.

Tim Parks therefore represents the other extremity in cyberliterature discourse, that of clear opposition, arguing that technological solutions have essentially given nothing to literature, and have, in fact, taken something from it.

Three theoretical approaches could be pointed out in the entire intricate complex which constitutes cyberliterature discourse. These three approaches are represented by Finnish scholars Markku Eskelinen and Raine Koskimaa, and the Norwegian author Espen Aarseth, and appear most productive in the perspective of further research. These scholars have given up the rigid dichotomy *book text* versus *digital text* and have plunged into the deeper nature of text creation.

Markku Eskelinen argues that the key to the study of cyberliterature is narratology and analysis of cybertexts from the aspects of narrative and, more importantly, of temporality. He focuses on the issues of the changing of time in cyberliterature, presentation of narrative, possibilities of its transformation and interpretation. While Gérard Genette describes narrative temporality by means of three concepts – order, speed and frequency –, Eskelinen argues that the temporality of cybertext can be described by means of 12 parameters (Eskelinen 2002: 55-56), where he further distinguishes between the time of the text and the time of reading. Temporality-centred approach is also supported by several examples of cyberliterature. In Stuart Moulthrop's *Hegirascope*, for example, the author has determined the length of time for reading the text: the text displayed on the screen changes in every 30 seconds unless the reader disrupts it before.

Raine Koskimaa has defended a comprehensive Ph.D. thesis *Digital Literatyre – From Text to Hypertext and Beyond* (Koskimaa 2000) on the topic and has focused in his most recent studies on the role of reader in interpreting cyberliterature, proceeding from the changes in traditional reading conventions in cyberliterature, and how cyberliterature “teaches” readers to read in novel ways.

His approach is based on Espen Aarseth's view that while generally a reader's role is limited to interpretation, then in terms of cyberliterature a reader or a user serves four functions. A reader has an active role – in addition to interpretation he navigates, configures and writes (Aarseth 1997: 64).

Espen Aarseth and cybertext

Espen Aarseth has proposed the most complex theoretical framework for the study of cyberliterature, and attempts to offer a universal key to solve all the problems in his *Cybertext Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Aarseth 1997). Some of Aarseth's views may seem shocking at first, since he views problems at unexpected angles. For example, Aarseth claims that the reason why the entire cyberliterature discourse has diverged is its focus on the medium, the means of presenting the text, i.e. either a book or a computer. Aarseth defines cybertext as a way of creating texts. He views text as a machine, and not in metaphorical sense but as an actual mechanical means for producing and consuming verbal signs. He uses the term *ergodic text* synonymously with *cybertext*, meaning that while reading, a reader is constantly involved in making nontrivial efforts, decisions, movements. Under trivial efforts Aarseth means the moving of eyes from line to another and turning pages. His definition of cybertext therefore does not only comprise computer-generated literature or computer games, MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons – text-based computer games) and virtual reality, but any text in any form, which requires the reader nontrivial efforts and is ambivalent and multilinear. A cybertext may therefore exist in print. Among such examples of cybertext Aarseth mentions *I Ching*, the Chinese *Book of Changes*, also the inscriptions on the walls of ancient Egyptian temples, *One Hundred Thousand Billion Sonnets* by Raymond Queneau, and the novel *Composition No. 1, Roman* by Marc Saporta, which has been created in the form of a deck of cards and can be read in random order (Aarseth 1997: 9-10). In this manner, cybertext would cover a major bulk of experimental literature. The definition of cybertext, therefore, does not proceed from the medium, the way a text is presented, but from the way the text has been created – it has to be created as multilinear or even as three-dimensional. Also, “cybertext shifts the focus”

from the traditional triple division author-text-reader “to the cybernetic intercourse between the various part(icipant)s in the textual machine” (Aarseth 1997: 22).

It is true that discourse on the topic of cybertext has been heated and there is no universal truth in this matter. In any case, computer technology has introduced a number of problems that even quite recently required no consideration. Changes brought along by technological progress should definitely be considered in the field of the humanities. Arguments over the freedom of the reader in reading a work of cyberliterature or an ordinary book in codex binding are fine, but discussions in these topics indicate that technological advances have forced us to take notice of aspects that were formerly considered marginal. Aarseth’s theory reminds Ihab Hassan’s statement on postmodernism: in the postmodern era we can find evidences of postmodernism even in texts that were never before considered postmodern, “because our eyes have learned to recognize postmodern features” (Hassan 2001: 24). Paraphrasing his words, we could say that “our eyes have learned to recognize cybertext features”.

On the Possibility of Cyberliterature in Estonia

In Estonia, discourse on cyberliterature has remained fairly modest. Compared to my overview a few years ago (see Viires 2002), very little cyberliterature has been added. Hasso Krull’s pure genre hypertext poem *Trepp* (‘Staircase’) ⁶ is still chrestomathic. Attempts in media art, however, have been considerably more dynamic (e.g. Raivo Kelomees, Mare Tralla, prematurely departed Tiia Johannson). The line marking the end of cyberliterature and the beginning of media art is often very thin, especially in terms of new intricate multimedia projects. Cyberliterature, in my opinion, is where the written text prevails over visual images and sound, where it is clear that the original impulse has been textual rather than visual (e.g. the works by M. D. Coverley ⁷ or John Caylay⁸).

The most interesting works of cyberliterature in Estonia have been created by *The Pression* group together with *Lendav Hollandlane* [‘The Flying Dutchman’]⁹. The work closest to cyber-

literature proper is Tambet Tamm's project *The Weather Station Never Lies*,¹⁰ available at the website, which leads the reader to an imaginary futuristic portal with news from Mars accompanied by a science fiction tale. Upon opening the web page the reader is given a warning that the web browser is out of date and a suggestion to download CyberScape Navigator 7.3 or Virtuanet Explorer 4+. Here the created futuristic reality is cleverly associated with error messages that computer users have to deal with on daily basis, so that the reader might at first even believe these. This is a truly good and witty example of cyberliterature.

Jaana Lepik's collection of poetry *Silmus vői sōlm* is available in the Internet in .mp3 file format.¹¹ Also, Lemmit Kaplinski and Jaak Tomberg's *Prepare*¹² has remained a unique example of a symbiosis of hypertext theory and creativity. Jaak Tomberg is also among the authors who take greater interest in the theory of cyberliterature.

Considering Espen Aarseth's definition of cybertext, the most copious example of this in Estonia would be the sonnet machine by Märt Väljataga, which has rendered the links between a text and a machine almost tangible. The elaboration of Raymond Queneau's idea in *One Hundred Thousand Billion Sonnets* resulted in constructing a gigantic machine to accompany the book (Väljataga 2000) and the online version. In its complexity, Väljataga's project would suit well to illustrate Aarseth's cybertext definition. Here the reader is offered a wonderful opportunity to observe the adaptation of a text in three different environments: in a printed edition with loose pages, in online version and as a three-dimensional machine. Relying on Aarseth, the question whether the text remains the same in all the three cases or undergoes changes could be answered here that it is the same cybertext and it is not dependent on the means of information.

The best example of translated cybertext poetry is perhaps the file poetry by a Russian author Lev Rubinstein, which in the Estonian language has been published, unfortunately, only in the form of a book (translation by Aare Pily, see Rubinstein 2003). In Rubinstein's work it becomes particularly clear how a text changes depending on its publication in an ordinary book or on file cards, the reading of which occurs as a spatial process, moving deeper

with each card. Rubinstein's work follows a strict order (each card has a specific location), which eludes the arbitrariness and tortuous branching into different directions that is characteristic of a cybertext.

Nevertheless, all the presented examples are random applications of cyberliterature. In the Estonian context, cyberliterature is first and foremost an opportunity for independent online publication, ranging from high professional level (poetry magazine *Ninniku*,¹³ for example) to amateur verses. Some literature portals (e.g. *Kloaak*,¹⁴ the portal of young authors, or *Algernon*¹⁵ for people interested in science fiction, and subsection on books in *Delfi* women's forum¹⁶; literature is also discussed in the webzine *Bahama Press*¹⁷) are interactive. In Estonia, the virtual world serves to solve problems caused by the limitations of the print media and functions, with no major experiments with form, as an addition to literature published on paper.

Peripheries of cyberliterature – *fanfiction*

The second half of this article deals with a specific and narrow subcategory of cyberliterature. The article will observe *fanfiction*, which is one of the most intriguing peripheral phenomena in online literature. Based on the categorisation of cyberliterature in the beginning of the article, this phenomenon covers texts available in the Internet which cannot be considered literature proper, but which incorporation in literary analysis would expand the boundaries of traditional literature. My approach would therefore be based on as broad definition of cyberliterature as possible, on a definition which would not limit the concept only to the specifics of hypertext but covers the entire online literature available in the Internet.

Fanfiction (or fanfic) has remained in the periphery also because it combines popular culture and literature in a unique symbiotic relationship. The scope of fanfiction in the net is infinite, thus the following discussion will be but a tip of the iceberg.

Fanfiction has been defined variously, but the general definition could be as follows: fanfiction in the general sense are texts created as a so-called pseudo-sequel to a book, comic book, *anime*,

television series or a movie, which is not created by professional writers but amateur authors, i.e. fans. Fanfiction's characters are usually the same than in the book or film that they are based on; also, the settings might be the same (although not necessarily), and the fanfiction author usually adds new storylines. The main reason behind creating fanfiction is the authors' fascination with the fan objects and their wish to see favourite characters in scenes other than those proposed by the authors of the original books and films. Another reason is entertainment and communication with the fan community who all like the same book, film, etc. A few articles have been written about fanfiction, mostly authored by fanfiction authors themselves. Quite a number of articles, mostly by Michela Ecks and Laura Hale (see Ecks, Hale 2000-2004), have been made available at Writers University website,¹⁸ but there are also other studies on fanfiction available in the Internet (e.g. Anciano 2000).

In print, the issues of fanfiction have been discussed for example in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* by Henry Jenkins (1992), which focuses on the fanfiction of television series. Also, fanfiction has been studied from the linguistic aspect by Sirpa Leppänen from the University of Jyväskylä, who has analysed the interference of the Finnish and English language in Finnish fanfiction and the interlanguage that has emerged as a result (Leppänen 2005).

History and typology of fanfiction

The history of fanfiction is actually quite difficult to determine, as many materials have not been documented or preserved and are based only on oral recollections or have disappeared in the infinite virtual space. Regardless of that Michela Ecks has written down the chronology of fanfiction history (see Ecks, Hale 2000-2004), and according to Ecks the beginning of fanfiction dates back to the 19th century, when fans of Lewis Carroll wrote sequels to his stories, and the admirers of Jane Austen's work wrote tales featuring Austen's characters in the 1920s and 1930s. The 1930s are considered a turning point in fanfiction history, witnessing the founding of the Sherlock Holmes Literary Society, which started to publish Sherlock Holmes fanfiction. In those days,

fanfiction was usually published in special fan magazines, or *fanzines*, and were targeted at admirers of a specific work. In modern times, even major publishers have issued some fanfiction collections (e.g. Bantam Books has published *Star Trek, the New Voyages*, 1976). The year 1967 is considered another turning point and the beginning of contemporary fanfiction, when the first fanfiction fanzine *Spockanalina* of the science fiction television series *Star Trek* was published. *Star Trek* remained the leading source of inspiration in fanfiction for a long period of time; its fanfiction was published in fanzines as well as in the form of a Usenet (a predecessor of the Internet) group *Net.startrek* (1982). Fanfiction flourished during 1989-1992 with the progress of the World Wide Web. Fanfiction became available for everyone with a network connection, which created the authors of fanfiction an opportunity to spread their work all over the world. This, in turn, inspired new authors to write fanfiction. Fanfiction was originally spread through mailing lists and news groups, later the fans of a television series or a book began to gather fanfiction on separate web pages. Mailing lists were replaced by interactive forums. In addition to television series the fanfiction of Japanese *anime* (animated cartoons) and *manga* (comic books) began to spread. In 1998 the website *FanFiction.Net* ¹⁹ was constructed with an aim to gather and systematise fanfiction. The website is active also today. But there is, of course, a multitude of other webpages dedicated to fanfiction in the Internet.

Observation of the original texts that have inspired fanfiction reveals that these are varied, too. *FanFiction.Net* attempts to systematise the written texts into separate subcategories of *anime*, comic books, films, books, television series, games, etc. There is the total of tens of thousands of units of fanfiction available at *FanFiction.Net*. The leading position is currently occupied by *Harry Potter* with *ca* 50,000 sequels registered in *FanFiction.Net*, the second place is evidently occupied by *The Lord of the Rings* with *ca* 13,000 fanfiction texts. Fanfiction has been inspired by the most surprising books – for example, there is fanfiction to the Bible or *Bridget Jones's Diary*. The most popular television series according to *FanFiction.Net* is probably *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with 6,600 fanfics, other popular series next to *Star Trek* are *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *The X-Files*, *Stargate SG-1*, *Sex and the City*, etc.

In addition to categorisation by original texts, fanfiction is often grouped according to traditional literary genres like novel, narrative, short story, poem, movie script. Fanfiction authors generally follow the established genre principles. Another, more specific criterion for categorising fanfiction is 'tonality' – the reader is told in advance what the story will be like. For example, fanfiction can be divided into *WAFF* (warm and fuzzy feeling) – light and easy-to-read nice tales with a happy ending; *Dark* – tales dealing with graver topics: death, violence, betrayal; *Lemon* – erotic fanfiction, divided into subcategories of homoerotic fanfiction (*Slash/Yaoi* and *Yuri*)(see Anciano 2000). To keep the texts that are freely available in the net from stirring the minds of young readers, a warning is sometimes attached to a fanfic, specifying the age group that the text is targeted at. PG-13 rating advises persons under 13 against reading the texts, NC-17 stands for erotic contents and violence and is not recommended to persons under 17. Generally speaking, the fanfiction community has made serious efforts to work out the principles of presenting the creation and specifications (e.g. a *disclaimer*, or information at the top of a fanfic to indicate that the author has no rights to the characters, since the authorship rights are already granted to the author of the original text, etc.). The issue of authorship rights is a central problem in fanfic, even though most authors of the original texts do not disapprove fanfic, but perceive it as adding to their popularity. Some authors, however, have forbidden the use of their works as a source of fanfiction (e.g. Larry Niven).

A separate category of fanfiction is visual fanfic. People elaborate on their favourite comic books: the most popular are the Japanese comic *manga* (the so-called *doujinshi*). These comics are rarely published in the Internet and are issued in small print numbers for groups of fans. There are also particularly refined examples of visual fanfic, such as, for example, a short amateur film on the themes of *Matrix* featuring amateur actors, but in the original *Matrix* setting and with the original props.²⁰

Quite a unique type of fanfiction is *real person fic*, or texts written by fans of various pop or rock groups. These are fanfictions depicting actual living persons. Depending on the author's will, pop and rock idols either act in a totally new environment or the

tales are sometimes associated with their musical activities. In some cases favourite pop artists are depicted as acting in the home place of a fanfiction author, or, for example, Britney Spears is depicted as a flight attendant. The authors have let the imagination run free, but have preserved the personal image, appearance and personality of the favourite artist so that the reader would find it easier to identify with the setting. The central theme in real person fics is love; the tales are often very romantic with erotic scenes, which graphic contents depends on the author's sense of decency. Next to pop artists, real person fics may be also about movie stars, sportsmen or politicians (e.g. there is fanfic about George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and Gondoleezza Rice). The range of groups and musicians who have inspired fanfiction is very wide, including The Beatles, Queen, Rammstein, t.A.T.u., Britney Spears, Backstreet Boys, David Bowie, etc.²¹

Currently there is an ongoing discussion in the fanfiction community about how ethical it is to write fanfiction about actual living persons. Arguments are widely different: some fanfiction websites refuse to publish such texts, others agree that it is all fantasy and entertainment, and thus writing about living celebrities is justified.

Fanfiction: author and readers

As a peripheral phenomenon of cyberliterature, fanfiction is still a literary phenomenon, which poses several problems. Firstly, the traditional role of the author has changed. Already the nature of fanfiction poses the question: who is the actual author? Is it the author of the original text? Or the fanfiction author who rewrites the work? Or is the fanfiction author a co-author? Or is it just plain plagiarism? Fanfiction authors usually use aliases and their real persons are not known. Like in any ordinary cybercommunity, members interact only in written form, and the actual person, name, sometimes also age, gender and nationality remains hidden. The reader of fanfiction is thus in a situation where he does not know the background of the author, and communicates only with pure creation, text. Fanfiction is almost the most extreme manifestation of the Barthesian "death of the author". Of course, the fanfiction community has its own star au-

thors, whose creation is highly recognised and waited for by everyone, as there are also authors in disgrace, particularly those who tend to plagiarise the works of other fanfiction authors.

Secondly, the traditional role of a reader has also changed: in fanfiction, readers directly interfere in the writing process with their comments. Fanfiction is generally posted by chapters and the responses of readers in fanfiction forums are truly interesting to follow. Whilst most responses are approving, there are also serious analyses and criticism. Sometimes an author takes readers' response into consideration, sometimes s/he does not. Thus the dream of most writers comes true in fanfiction: the authors immediately learn what their readers think of the work, and do not have to wait until the end of the complicated printing process and the painful waiting for reviews. Here, readers can also suggest the possible development of the story and the character they would like to read more about. Returning to Espen Aarseth's definition, this almost presents a parallel to the "active reader" characteristic of cyberliterature. While the traditional role of a reader is only interpretation, in cyberliterature the reader is active, s/he navigates, configures and writes. Analogously, the reader of fanfiction is active: instead of mere reading, s/he actively interferes with the author's creative process. A separate type of cyberliterature is collective fanfiction novels, where several authors are simultaneously writing the same story. Here, too, the readers play a more important role, because a reader may gradually join the group of authors and transform from a reader into an author.

Fanfiction and simulacrum

The most intriguing and complicated type of fanfiction is real person fiction, as it combines reality, fiction created by the authors' fantasy, as well as the symbolic images of pop stars created by themselves. While analysing real person fic it would be most productive to use the concepts of simulacrum and hyper-reality proposed by Jean Baudrillard. According to Baudrillard, a simulacrum is a copy for which there is no original, and fanfiction characters are copies of the character images of pop stars created for the general public, and may not exist in real life. Real

life fiction may therefore be seen as a form of hyperreality, where fictitious characters are replaced by double coded simulacra of the representations or images of real persons. One of the most interesting examples here would be fanfiction inspired by the Russian girl group t.A.T.u. The pop group t.A.T.u. was a post-modernist phenomena and pure simulacrum in that it represented an invented lesbian image, which had nothing to do with the actual personalities of the girls. Regardless of that, t.A.T.u. managed to deceive a number of ardent fans, who perpetuated the imaginary Lena Katina and Julia Volkova in various romantic or even lesbian-erotic fanfiction tales. Thus it seems that fanfiction about t.A.T.u. was the simulacrum of simulacrum – the elaboration of an image which did not exist in reality by the imagination of authors. Real person fiction becomes particularly refined when the author includes his/her own person among his favourite group or characters and merges his personal life and problems with his idols. On the one hand this is a device known in postmodernist literature as vicious circle, where a real person becomes a character interfering with the fictitious world. But while in fanfiction the fictitious world is already bordering on reality/hyperreality, the author's own interference as a character makes the manipulation with reality even more intense.

Fanfiction in Estonia

A search for fanfiction in the Estonian web has proved rather complicated. Certainly, it is impossible to know how many Estonians may be writing in various English-language forums under aliases. Russians in Estonia have written pure genre *anime* fanfiction in the Russian language; these authors are joined by the Estonian Virtual Anime Club.²² Tolkien fanfiction has been written by the society *Kepsleva Poni Selts*. Though this is intended as a script for the role play *A Walk through the Vastness of Middle-Earth*,²³ it shares all the characteristics of fanfiction – characters and setting of *The Lord of the Rings*, new story lines and collective authorship. It is possible, of course, that the vast space of Internet contains other material that the author has not come upon. But is it even possible to create Estonian-language real person fic? One of the preconditions of fanfiction is the distance and unattainability of the idol, but in Estonia it is

possible to meet your favourite pop group at the next street corner. At least the Estonian girl group Vanilla Ninja ²⁴ has inspired fanfiction in a German-language forum.

A completely authentic example of Estonian home-made fanfiction, which was further fed by mysterious circumstances following its publication, is perhaps a pseudo-sequel by Arnold Karu to the tales written by the famous Estonian author Oskar Luts, the notorious *Talve* ('Winter', Luts 1994).

Speculatively, the novel *Mõru maik* ['Bitter Taste'] by Hiram (1999) could be considered the next level of fanfiction. Hiram's creation can be essentially considered fanfiction according to every genre rule – it includes intense emotions, betrayal, photos of concerts and backstages, characters of rock artists and real people surrounding them. Considering Baudrillard's concepts, however, Hiram's text is even more hyperrealistic than ordinary fanfiction, where actual living musicians are perceived as symbols of certain images, and are included in the events according to the author's imagination. Hiram also invents an imaginary rock group, the "next level simulacrum", imaginary interviews and imaginary music videos, which he then describes in his novel. Making a reference to Baudrillard: "Signs are a reality and the imaginary and the real have become confused" (see Watson 2002: 60).

Fanfiction metamorphoses

Hiram's case introduces another stage in the adaptation of texts and fanfiction. Namely, there are good and bad writers among fanfiction authors, like there are among authors of traditional literature. And some better fanfiction authors often reach a point where they decide to start treading the thorny road of "literature proper". The author of this article has corresponded with a fanfiction author, Linna Wongwantanee from Thailand, who turned her real person fanfiction about t.A.T.u. into an actual novel and published it in print. For that she changed the names of characters, drew out stylistic exaggerations, had her manuscript thoroughly edited and the book was published in a respected publishing house and is now available at several online book stores (Wongwantanee 2004). As to the reasons for not being satisfied with fanfiction, she mentioned:

Fanfiction has limitations. My characters are not mine, they either belong to a television series or are actual living persons, and I cannot write about actual living persons just anything that comes to my head. In fanfiction I have no control over my characters; I am not free as an author. When I started to write fanfiction I sought entertainment, wished to express my fascination with my favourite rock group and communicate with other members of the fan community. But the more I wrote, the more the writing became serious for me. And then one moment I realised that I was no longer writing about my pop idols, but about myself. I discovered feelings and thoughts in myself that I did not know existed in me and that I was then pouring in my writing. This moment I realised that I was no longer writing fanfiction. Fanfiction is entertainment. Literature, the true art, is what touches you deeply and actually. So I gave up fanfiction and turned my novel into literature.²⁵

Fanfiction thus makes its way back to 'literature proper', adapting to new rules, and Linna Wongwantanee's novel is no longer posted chapter by chapter to an Internet forum, interrelated with the readers' comments, but is published as a respectable hardcover by a proper publishing house.

Fanfiction as innocence refound

Fanfiction could be called "innocent literature". I will attempt to explain this metaphor as follows. Fanfiction is based on "rewriting", "reconstructing" of earlier texts, even on intertextuality with the original source text. Of course, rewriting of previously written text is one of the main characteristics of postmodernist literature. But postmodernist rewriting is first and foremost ironic. Umberto Eco has argued that postmodernist literature is characterised by the loss of innocence, meaning that every word and sentence has already been uttered by somebody else and the use of these words and sentences alludes to all these previously uttered meanings. Equipped with this knowledge, a postmodernist author can thus write only in the ironic key. According to Eco, a postmodernist author discovers that one cannot escape the past but the past can be reconstructed and reused only in a corrupt, ironic or parodic way (Eco 1985: 67).

As to fanfiction, however, the attitude of authors and fans towards the source texts of or real persons in their creation is not ironic but reverent. Even the first impulse of parodies in fanfiction is admiration and respect towards the source object (book, film, comic book, pop idol). In fanfiction irony is out of the question. Thus, while Eco sees the loss of innocence in postmodernist writing, in fanfiction this innocence is as if refound – fanfiction is a return to innocent and playful literature.

Fanfiction could therefore be regarded as the pure form, free of experiments, knowledge and cultural layers, where the author as a narrator tells a story or a fairytale about characters known and loved by all, having thus a point of convergence with contemporary folklore. And listeners are sitting around the narrator, with beaming eyes, occasionally interfering, “Tell us more! Tell us more!”

Adaptation of texts in cyberspace: concluding remarks

As mentioned in the beginning of the article, cyberliterature constitutes only a part of a wider set of problems in the context of the general technological progress in the society and its turning into a society of communication and information. Here we are also dealing with the multitude of possibilities characteristic of postmodernist cultural scene, the expansion of the concept of literature and the emergence of new literary forms. Cyberliterature is a result of this postmodernist expansion, where the concept of literature is broadened, incorporating former peripheries. Cyberliterature has also added new forms to the usual books in codex binding in the form of a multimedia artefact, which would be a symbiosis of literature, visual arts, music. Computer as a medium serves two functions here: firstly, it enables to present complicated non-linear text structures or to program entirely new works of art; secondly, the computer serves to democratise literature. In the virtual space, modernist elitist literature is replaced by literature for common people, ranging from ordinary amateur literature to specific types like fanfiction. Here it is possible to witness the blurring of boundaries between literature and folklore and perhaps their possible convergence.

As a concluding note, I would like to express my wish that cyberliterature discourse will open up a discussion in the Estonian literary theory and the adding of new original works of cyberliterature. A promising approach in the study of cyberliterature seems to be narratology, i.e. the analysing of cybertext in the perspective of narrative flow and disruptions in the narration. This is closely related to the issues of temporality and these may yield fascinating results in the analysis of cybertexts. Another possibility would be the application of Espen Aarseth's general concept of cybertext and not limiting the objects of analysis only to computer technology.

Comments

1 The article was written with the support of Estonian Science Foundation grant no. 5965 "The Problem of Media-Determinism and Temporal-Spatial Relations of the Work of Art".

2 <http://www.gutenberg.org/>

3 <http://www.eki.ee/ninniku/>

4 <http://www.adisain.ee/kloaak/>

5 <http://www.eastgate.com> On some more interesting examples of cyberliterature, see e.g. Viires 2002: 1238.

6 <http://www.eki.ee/kodud/krull/>

7 <http://califia.hispeed.com/Afterimage/>

8 <http://www.shadoof.net/in/>

9 <http://thepression.tfd.ee/>

10 <http://thepression.tfd.ee/ulme/index.html>

11 <http://www.bahamapress.org/>

12 <http://lemmit.kaplinski.com/prepare/>

13 <http://www.eki.ee/ninniku/>

14 <http://www.adisain.ee/kloaak/>

15 <http://www.obs.ee/cgi-bin/w3-mysql/algermon/index.html>

16 <http://woman.delfi.ee/foorum/list.php?f=8>

17 <http://www.bahamapress.org/>

18 <http://www.writersu.com/WU/> (last accessed in April 10, 2004; currently unavailable)

19 <http://www.fanfiction.net/>

20 See <http://www.fanimatrix.net>

21 See e.g. The Beatles Fan Fiction <http://classicrock.about.com/cs/fanfiction/>

22 <http://www.hot.ee/evanime/> (last accessed on April 10, 2004; currently unavailable)

23 <http://members.lycos.co.uk/rollimang/phpBB2/viewforum.php?f=2&sid=69643d2e57aa446f595f2f64e775bc0c>

24 See <http://www.vnboard.de/forum/>

25 Synopsis from personal e-mail correspondence with L.Wongwantanee in Feb. 2, 2004; Feb. 24, 2004, March 1, 2004, April 22, 2004.

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