Deakin University

Maria Takolander

Theft as creative methodology: A case study of digital narratives

Abstract:

Creativity is often still Romantically conceived and valued in terms of its purity and originality. However, this paper argues that theft—or revisionism—has been a fundamental methodology of creative practice from ancient times through to the digital age. Creativity is visionary only insofar as it is revisionary, and this is because, as common sense confirms, it always emerges from within a cultural domain. The first section of this paper, following the work of Pierre Bourdieu, advances a theory of revisionism grounded in the 'field of cultural production.' The second part of the paper explores how literary revisionism manifests itself as a central methodology of creative practice in the digital age. It concludes with a brief study of an interactive digital narrative pilot, *We Tell Stories*, by a major publisher of traditional literature, Penguin in the UK. This project demonstrates how a revisionary methodology remains central to a publishing economy increasingly challenged to 'remediate' (in Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's terms) in response to the digital revolution. It also makes visible the function of revisionism within the 'field of cultural production,' as theorised by Bourdieu, in part because of the defamiliarised context for creativity afforded by the digital.

Biographical note:

Associate Professor Maria Takolander has published numerous papers theorising creativity. She is the author of two full-length collections of poetry, *The End of the World* (Giramondo, 2014), which was reviewed in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Ghostly Subjects* (Salt 2009), which was shortlisted for a Queensland Premier's Prize. The winner of the inaugural *ABR* Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize, Maria is also the author of *The Double (and Other Stories)* (Text, 2013), which was shortlisted for the Melbourne Prize for Literature. The recipient of two Australia Council grants, Maria is currently writing a novel for Text Publishing. She works at Deakin University in Geelong, Victoria.

Introduction

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu critiques what he calls the '"charismatic" ideology' of art introduced by Romanticism (1993: 76). For Bourdieu, that ideology 'is undoubtedly the main obstacle to a vigorous science of the production of the value of cultural goods' because it 'directs attention to the *apparent producer*' and away from the defining 'field of production and circulation of cultural commodities' (76). Bourdieu's point, of course, is that the mystification of the artist is central to the operation of the cultural economy that developed in the Romantic period and that continues to define the creative industries. The author is like a magician—surrounded by a 'circle of belief' (77), the subject of a '*collective misrecognition*' (81)—while the worldly mechanics of the author's tricks go unseen. However, it is the worldly mechanics or material context for authorship that I want to acknowledge as the context for this paper. For while creative practitioners might be Romantically conceptualised as uniquely and even purely inspired, writers are all 'initiated' into their field of cultural production, as Bourdieu puts it, through a 'system of consecratory institutions' that operate 'within the field of producers for producers' (1993: 5). In fact, it is only because of their initiation that authors are 'capable of renewing' the cultural field (121). The implication of fundamental interest here is that creativity must be conceptualised as revisionary rather than visionary; as rooted in a context of tradition, traditional institutions and traditional investments, rather than individual genius. This is not an altogether original or provocative claim, as the longstanding work of literary theorists and philosophers such as Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva on intertextuality suggests. However, this paper seeks to explore not only how writers revise within a traditional context, but more specifically how a revisionary methodology reveals itself in a publishing economy increasingly challenged by new media.

Following Bourdieu, I begin this paper by investigating creativity as an outcome of revisionary practice in a cultural field. Indeed, it is the argument of this paper that understanding creativity as revisionism necessitates a materialist theory of creativity, according to which 'initiation' into the field of 'consecrated' artefacts (Bourdieu 1993: 123), and 'the institutions which ensure the profitability of the cultural heritage and legitimize its transmission' (235), must be taken into account. To put it simply, the first part of this paper advances a theory of creativity as revisionism, grounded in the material world of the creative writer, who writes—or perhaps re-writes—in a vital cultural and commercial context. It is a theory of intertextuality that does not prescribe the 'death of the author,' as literary-studies scholars after Barthes might have it, but rather informs the writing *life*.

In the second part of the paper, I turn my attention to digital creativity and a brief study of a pilot digital narrative project by the global publisher Penguin Books. *We Tell Stories* (Cumming et al 1995-2008) is a collaborative venture between Penguin in the UK and the interactive games developer Six-to-Start, and is comprised of a series of six interactive digital narratives, each one of which revises a literary genre or classic story. This project of revisionism illustrates the theory of a 'remediating' media ecology advanced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000), which highlights not only the revisionary interplay between media forms but also their competition in an industrial context. Certainly the revisionary methodologies of *We Tell Stories*, as this paper argues, are inextricable from a transitional publishing economy in which the digital both threatens conventional literary publishing and embodies its commercial future.

Revisionism as creative methodology in a cultural field

Revisionism—conceived of as 'anxious' by Harold Bloom (1973) or as 'ecstatic' by Jonathan Lethem (2007)—is a creative methodology as old as culture itself. It can involve the recycling of content or the renovation of form, with the two functioning in dynamic relation, as we will see, in the case of Penguin's digital narrative experiment *We Tell Stories* (1995-2008). Revisionism involves cultural preservation *and* some degree of innovative transformation. It 'makes it new,' in Ezra Pound's famous words, but only by revising the old—with Pound's dictum itself recycled from Chinese philosophy and, notably, from a French translation of a phrase more properly rendered in English as 'do it again' (North 2003).

In ancient Greek art, revisionism was sanctified practice. Greek playwrights recycled characters and plots from ancient mythology, and their works were measured in competition against not only those of their contemporaries but also their mythological antecedents. Their plays were *generic*, as theorised by Aristotle, with the very concept of genre illustrating creativity's reliance on repetition. We might likewise say that they were *parodic*, a term that also traces its roots to ancient Greece, as Robert Chambers suggests, where it meant 'a beside-or-against song' (2010: 3). Parody was a reiteration rather than a mockery, and its revisionary force simultaneously acted as 'the principal breeder of new directions in the arts and the chief rehabilitator of old ones' (11).

Throughout the succeeding millennia, art in all its forms continued to be practiced and received as the development of a specific tradition—and in a dynamic material or commercial context. Accordingly, as John Moffitt argues, an artist did not enjoy 'liberal' prestige for most of Western history (2005: 36). He (for it usually was a he) was a scribe or craftsperson, his artisanal skills acquired through imitation and for the purpose of cultural employment. This began to change with the Renaissance and the introduction of the printing press in the fifteenth century, which generated the potential for a commodity-based arts culture and the profitability of a brand name. By the eighteenth century, the Romantics had developed 'the idea of the wholly autonomous, creative personality,' an oppositional and opportunistic vision of the artist, 'shaped by contemporaneous competition in the marketplace' (Moffitt 2005: 191). Not surprisingly, copyright laws were developed at this time to enshrine their original work in law. Nevertheless, the literature of the Romantics was just as embedded in tradition as that of their predecessors. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), for example, self-consciously revises the socially performed ballad in favour of a more personal lyric. Indeed, it is the argument of this paper that creativity can never be liberated from a revisionary methodology because it cannot exist outside of the cultural and material context from which it inevitably arises and derives meaning.

Modern and postmodern literature is defined by an allegedly unparalleled and self-reflexive revisionism. If this is indeed the case, it is inseparable from the concurrent advance of communication technologies—photography, radio, motion pictures, the internet—and the consequent expansion of the cultural field, which proliferated the range of artefacts available for parody (or the tradition generative of revision.) Revisionism in literature is also indivisible from the ways in which competition from other media rendered the textual artefact a potential anachronism or a commercial problem. Modernist and postmodern literature became attuned to itself as one artefact in a cultural field of different artefacts, engaging with

its own medium in relation to other media, strategically employing the 'strategies of cooperation and competition'—of cross-media revisionism—that Bolter identifies as characteristic of the 'remediating relationships' of media ecologies (2014: 428).

In their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale identify the twentieth-century modernist period as particularly revisionary in regards to form or the textual medium. The Futurists famously embraced emerging technologies, as evident in the energetic 'sound' and 'concrete' poetry of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (though it is worth noting that concrete or 'shape' poetry had already been practiced by the religious poet George Herbert in the seventeenth century, thus again proving the Ecclesiastical proverb—of resonance to creativity—that there is nothing new under the sun.) TS Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), by contrast, mourned modern media's dissolution of Western civilization, while paradoxically remediating fragments of radio broadcasts, newspapers, and the music hall. Eliot, of course, famously declared that 'immature poets imitate; mature poets steal' (1921), thus effectively ironising the pessimism so often attributed to his revisionary media collage. Postmodern literature sustained this engagement with form and the revisionary strategy of remediation, as communications technologies continued to develop and challenge the print culture that had reigned supreme for thousands of years (if we include the manuscript age that preceded the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century.) The Oulipo movement adopted a technophiliac proceduralism, while William Burrough's cut-up technique (itself a revision of Dadaist process) focused on the structural and interchangeable elements of language in ways influenced by the media and film. In all of these examples of remediation, what we effectively see is revisionism at work, apparent in the preservation and transformation of creative techniques associated with the source medium.

It is a testament to the strength of the cultural industry's 'universes of belief' (Bourdieu 1993: 82) that, despite Barthes's notorious declaration of the death of the author in favour of the auto-generativity of intertextuality—exaggerated in the 'ready-mades' of Marcel Duchamp and Kenneth Goldsmith's 'uncreative writing'—'the quasi-magical potency of the signature' of the creative practitioner has endured (Bourdieu 1993: 81). This is because the field of cultural production, comprised of 'this or that "influential" person, this or that institution, review, magazine, academy, coterie, dealer or publisher' (78)—which Bourdieu characterises as a 'game'—has not fundamentally changed (even despite, as we will see, the alleged disruption of the digital.) Bourdieu explains: 'the work manages to enter the game ... becomes a stake in the game and so incorporates some of the energy produced in the struggle of which it is the object' (111). The mystique and profitability of a work, regardless of its content, is made 'a hundred times, by all those who are interested in it, who find a material or symbolic profit in reading it, classifying it, deciphering it, commenting on it, combating it, knowing it, possessing it' (111). Thus, 'the quasi-magical potency of the signature is nothing other than the power, bestowed on certain individuals, to mobilize the symbolic energy produced by the functioning of the whole field, ie the faith in the game and its stakes that is produced by the game itself' (81). The methodology of revisionism, which compromises the power of the individual brand, must be suppressed for this 'game' to be played out (though this suppression is ambivalent, given the importance of institutions such as genre and of cultural capital to the continuity and profitability of the system.)

The digital (much like cinema during the modernist age) has been repeatedly figured as

precipitating the end of the 'game'—as auguring the end of literary culture—in part because of the democratic nature of the medium, which undermines the power of myths of individual genius and of publishing gatekeepers. The collaborative and multimodal practice that often characterises digital forms also subverts the talismanic creativity of the 'one.' In *Literature in the Digital Age* (2016), Adam Hammond outlines the anti-digital arguments put forward in publications such as Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brain* (2010) and Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom* (2010), which predict the annihilation of literary culture by the mindless ephemera of the masses and the multimodal onslaught of the digital. However, as Hammond argues, 'far from standing as isometric opposites, print and the digital have become so forcefully intertwined as to be meaningful only in relation to one another' (2016: 203).

This is in part because of their technological convergence. As N Katherine Hayles points out, 'almost all print books are digital files before they become books' so that the codex is simply 'the output form' of literature's instantiation through primarily digital processes (2007: 99). In addition, print literature has been revised through processes of digital remediation. Alison Gibbons traces how 'the event of the digital' has 'effected the rise of multimodal literature' (2012: 425), apparent in the current popularity of the graphic novel—though such multimodal artefacts, as Gibbons points out, have a long history, going back to medieval illuminated religious manuscripts and Victorian-era children's books. In fact, for Hammond, if the codex has undergone a kind of 'renaissance,' it is one that 'must be understood as a reaction against the digital that is paradoxically abetted by the digital' (2016: 203). This is most evident in works that draw attention to their status as artefacts, such as Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010), an accordion-style fold-out multimodal volume of poetry housed in a box, or Mark Z Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), which experiments with spiralling and inverted text, as well as footnotes and typography (although such artefacts also have modernist and even pre-modernist precursors.) Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) is another example of a revisionary text forged through the remediating energies of a new media ecology marked by the digital—and one that Hammond names as 'exemplary ... because it refuses to be contained by any theory of contemporary textuality that envisions print and the digital as irreconcilable, rival categories' (2016: 206). Egan's novel, which portrays music-industry professionals going through various crises in the context of a digital revolution that has already transformed their industry, revises the digital form of the PowerPoint into a storytelling medium. Her novel contains a stand-alone and standout chapter in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, available in enhanced format (featuring colour and music) on her author website.

While such formally revisionary artefacts paradoxically renew the romance of the codex, they do so in an industrial context that acknowledges digital media as a challenge and potential threat. In 'The Shifting Author-Reader Dynamic,' R. Lyle Skains outlines the state of contemporary publishing, which is not surrendering to multimedia competition but 'feeling its way into the digital world' (2010, 96), through revisionary experiments such as Egan's novel. The context for such formal or technical revisionism is clearly commercial: 'The next generation of readers is currently in their teens, spending far more attention, time, and money on digital platforms such as gaming and internet interactions than they do in any other entertainment genre' (96). According to Skains, the field of literary production currently occupies 'an intermediate stage' (2010: 108), paving the way for 'the emergence of a

mainstream digital storytelling culture' (109). In fact, Skains optimistically predicts that 'digital stories will be accepted into a literary canon within one generation' (99).

Penguin's *We Tell Stories*, published between 1995 and 2008, is a first attempt by a major publisher to future-proof its business through an embrace of formal revisionism vis-à-vis the digital—an attempt more recently repeated by Hachette's *New Star Soccer Story* 'game book' (2016). Whereas Hachette's experiment attempts to remediate digital gaming into literature, in a self-conscious effort to lure young gamers back to reading, Penguin's earlier project attempts to remediate literature into the digital, trying to manage the transition of readers into the digital space. The differences between the two projects are instructive, suggesting how quickly the digital, as Skains predicted, has become dominant. However, the concern of this paper is with how *We Tell Stories*, designed for conventional readers rather than gamers, takes canonical genres and stories, and revises their information design for the digital environment. Moreover, this paper is concerned with how Penguin's experiment employs the creative methodology of revisionism vis-à-vis the canon in an attempt to: 1) achieve the 'consecration' (Bourdieu 1993: 79) of the digital within the field of literary production; and 2) thereby maintain control over the cultural field in an age of media competition.

Revisionism and the appropriation of cultural capital in digital media

We Tell Stories is a pilot from the major global publisher Penguin in collaboration with a company, Six-to-Start, better known for producing motivational fitness apps. Unlike electronic or digitised books, each story in this project is genuinely digital—a category defined by Roberto Simanowski as 'literature that is not only presented in and distributed by digital media, but also takes *aesthetic* advantage of their specific characteristics' (2016: 384). However, each story is also canonically and strategically literary, showing how revisionism within the cultural field is always part of the 'game' identified by Bourdieu, with that game being dominated by 'players' with vested interests.

Charles Cumming's *The 21 Steps* is a thriller based on John Buchan's *The 39 Steps* (1915) (perhaps better known for its adaptation into film by Alfred Hitchcock—adaptation providing another central revisionary intermedia creative methodology.) *The 21 Steps* uses Google maps as its interface, enabling the reader to cartographically visualize the narrated chase from one real location in London to another. Toby Litt's *Slice* is a blog-based horror story inspired by MR James's 'The Haunted Doll's House' (1923), paying homage to the epistolary form of gothic texts. Matt Mason's *Hard Times* rewrites Charles Dickens's novel of that title as an experimental digital essay, reflecting on the 'hard times' of a transitional media and economy. Of course, there is an upbeat ending. Kevin Brooks's digital *Fairy Tales* recreates the stories of Hans Christian Anderson into an interactive experience for younger readers. Mohsin Hamid's *The (Former) General* reinvents *The Thousand and One Nights* in 'Choose-your-own-adventure' style. Nicci French's *Your Place or Mine* provides a real-time digital version of Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), which was itself serialized (and thus released in a similarly episodic fashion) before its publication as a novel.

In an interview about the project, Adrian Hon, the Chief Creative Officer of Six-to-Start, explains that the familiar templates were deliberately chosen to make the prospect of interacting with digital technologies less daunting for readers (2008). As Hayles puts it in *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, 'readers come to digital work with

expectations formed by print ... Of necessity, electronic literature must build on these expectations even as it modifies and transforms them' (2008: 4). In fact, this strategy of appropriating the familiarity but also the value of the literary is routine in the world of digital media. As Jessica Pressman argues in *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media*, digital literature, seeking to affirm its status in the cultural field, sources 'inspiration and validation in a literary past' (2014: 2). This bid for cultural capital is apparent in now-classic first-wave hypertext fictions, such as Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995), which remediates and revises the story of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), reconstructing the body of the female monster discarded by the scientist Victor Frankenstein. Remediation and revision of canonical literature and film is also commonplace in newer forms of digital literature as well as in digital gaming, as Zach Whalen and Laurie N Taylor reveal in *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* (2008). Canonical revisionism also informs the digital practices of fan and slash fiction, with a number of *Jane Eyre* fan fictions, for instance, making it to publication and thus securing genuine purchase in the cultural field via strategies of literary appropriation.

As Andrew Epstein writes, 'recent technological and social transformations have only made the relationship between artistic inspiration and appropriation blurrier than ever' (2012: 310). However, it is the 'charisma' generated by those revisionary methodologies—which confirm 'the ideology of the inexhaustible work of art' (Bourdieu 1993: 111)—that is central to their potential 'consecration.' Thus Pressman, noting that digital forms of literature are obsessed not 'with newness' but 'literary history' (2013: 1), makes the case 'for considering these digital creations as "literature"' to be read 'within the tradition of literary history' (3). This reorientation to the digital in the humanities serves the literary field as surely as the engagement with the digital in publishing, given that those institutions are key players in Bourdieu's 'game' of cultural production. While early theorists opposed the ludic culture of digital gaming to the readerly culture of digital literature, those distinctions are being neutralised as scholars in the humanities—revealing their own part in the power 'game' of culture—insist on the literariness of digital creativity. It is a position that clearly responds to the revisionary methodologies everywhere apparent in digital culture but also, of course, to the expected transition to a digitally dominated media ecology. In the study *Literary Gaming*, for example, Astrid Ensslin concedes that 'literary gaming is a somewhat paradoxical term because literature and computer games are two entirely different interactive productive, aesthetic, phenomenological, social, and discursive phenomena' (2014: 38). Nevertheless, she goes on to argue that 'some qualities of literary computer games and ludic-experimental digital literature are indeed compatible' (38) and even that literature is 'not bound to any particular genre, medium, platform or technology' (2), thus hyperbolically expanding the cultural field over which the literary humanities might preside.

However, it seems that the evolution of the relationship between the digital and the literary cannot be orchestrated or controlled in the way that Penguin seems to have desired. In her study of Cumming's Google-story *The 21 Steps*, Annika Richterich surveys user opinions of this 'map-fiction-mashup' (2011: 240) and concludes that Penguin's digital literary experiment is a failure. Richterich argues that it contradicts 'the participant's conventions regarding their accustomed, instrumental reading of maps as well as their reading habits regarding literature' (246). She adds: 'Overall, the user acceptance was therefore low and one could almost speak of a certain resistance' (246). The digital enthusiast Hayles—who is a

member of the Electronic Literature Organisation and a curator of the avant-garde hybrids of the *Electronic Literature Collection*—embraces electronic literature precisely for its capacity to discomfortingly reveal our proficiencies and deficiencies in regards to the media technologies of the codex and the computer, and the different modalities to which they give rise. For Hayles, electronic literature can lead to 'flashes of insight and illumination' (2008: 138) about 'who we have been, who we are, and who we might become' (157). Electronic literature, for Hayles, is thus part of the post-humanist re-evaluation of traditional ways of understanding identity.

I am, however, more interested in how digital literature might allow us to understand creativity as a fundamentally revisionary methodology that emerges from creativity's grounding in a field of cultural production, which is to say, a field of (inter)texts and industrial complexes that enrich and reward the generation of those (inter)texts. As Hayles and Pressman write in their introduction to *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*, 'when writing was accomplished by a quill pen, ink pot, and paper, it was possible to fantasize that writing was simple and straightforward, a means by which the writer's thoughts could be transferred more or less directly into the reader's mind' (2013: ix). However, with the overtly institutional and revisionary processes of digital literature (not to mention their collaborative nature as multimodal texts), we have the opportunity to move away from the dream of the 'author'—'the unnatural idea of inborn culture, of a gift of culture, bestowed on certain people by nature' (Bourdieu 1993: 235)— and to a materialist understanding of how creativity really works.

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