

GREAT RUSSIAN  
NOVEL

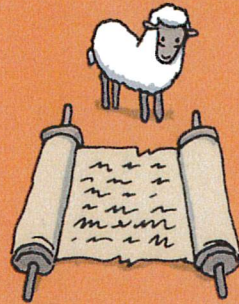
SATIRICAL  
NOVEL

FORGOTTEN  
NOVEL

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
**THE NOVEL**

Eric Bulson

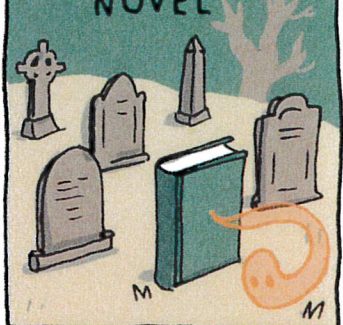
PROTO-NOVEL



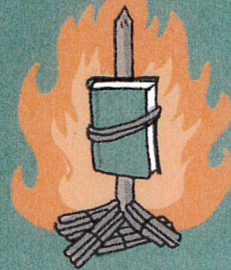
ALLEGORICAL  
NOVEL



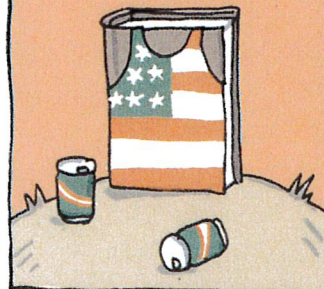
GOTHIC  
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HERETICAL  
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GREAT AMERICAN  
NOVEL



EXPERIMENTAL  
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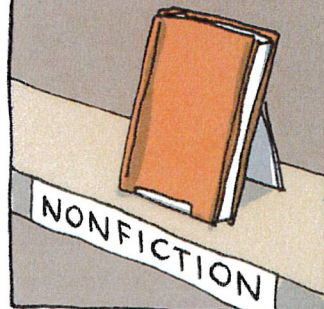
FINISH ME,  
I DARE YOU.



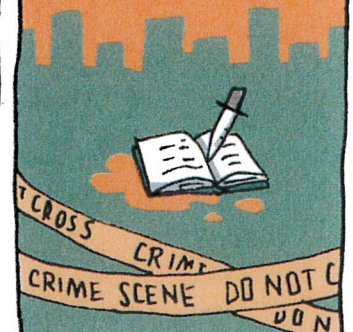
TABOO NOVEL



HOAX NOVEL



GENRE NOVEL





THE CAMBRIDGE  
COMPANION TO  
**THE NOVEL**

EDITED BY

ERIC BULSON

*Claremont Graduate University*

 **CAMBRIDGE**  
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## CONTRIBUTORS

- MARK ALGEE-HEWITT Director of the Stanford Literary Lab and Assistant Professor of English and Digital Humanities at Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
- JAN BAETENS Professor of Cultural and Literary Studies at the University of Leuven, Belgium
- ALEXANDER BEECROFT Professor of Classics and Comparative Literature in Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA
- ERIC BUISSON Professor of English at Claremont Graduate University, Claremont, CA, USA
- VILASHINI COOPPAN Associate Professor of Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, USA
- MARTA FIGLEROWICZ Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and English at Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA
- CATHERINE FLYNN Associate Professor of English at the University of California Berkeley, CA, USA
- ERIK FREDNER Ph.D. candidate in the English Department at Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
- HUGO FREY Department Head and Chair in Cultural and Visual History at the University of Chichester, West Sussex, UK
- DAVID JAMES Professorial Research Fellow in the Department of English Literature at the University of Birmingham, UK
- PRIYA JOSHI Professor of English, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA
- SUZANNE KEEN Thomas Broadus Professor of English and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA, USA

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JESSICA PRESSMAN

## The Novel in the Digital Age

The novel in the digital age does what the novel has always done: it challenges expectations of what a novel is and what it can do. The novel is a genre concerned with newness and novelty, and digital technologies enable new ways of exploring novelty across literary content, form, and format as well as across production, distribution, and reception processes. e-Readers, apps, Amazon, and transmedia storytelling make it so that we no longer expect a novel to be packaged in a codex, purchased at the familiar places, and read in the usual way, one page at a time. The novel genre no longer needs to be defined by its length or focus on human characters or even such standard expectations as an Aristotelian plot or the coming-of-age *Bildungsroman* narrative. Contemporary novels engage the digital in order to proclaim newness, and this chapter explores three novels exemplary in this regard. All published since 2000 – that momentous year of millennial change and moment of transition to Web 2.0 – these case studies show how the novel genre addresses the medial shift by aestheticizing materiality and by focusing attention on the artifactuality of literature.

In an age when pundits proclaim the death of the book and the inevitable fallout from this situation – just think of the two most famous laments of this sort, Sven Birkerts' *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* and Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* – contemporary novels illuminate a different path. They employ digital tools and practices to exploit the physical aspects of the book medium and thereby reveal the power of the codex. They present narratives about books that diegetically explore the continued impact of the book in the digital age. Such contemporary novels ensure that books remain part of our digital culture even as they also showcase new formats and possibilities for the novel genre.

The novel in the digital age is actually quite bookish. As we will see, contemporary novels often exploit the possibilities of digital production and publishing with pages that contain multiple colors, die-cut holes, and

images, all of which are made more possible (not to mention cheaper) with new production processes and technologies. They engage with the culture of big data by going big in the sheer number of pages and the material heft of their bodies or in their aesthetic ambitions to imitate a computer database (think of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*). They engage the digital technoculture by narrating the effects of social networking and global capitalism (think of Gary Shreyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*). They narrate the medial shift as it affects literature's institutions (think of Tom Engelhardt's *The Last Days of Publishing*). They incorporate digital communication practices into their narratives, remediate hyperlinks or even actually linking up to the Web to form transmedia networks (think of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*). Of course, there are also those novels that fully embrace the digital from conception to distribution, as born-digital literature. I'm sure there are other categories and responses too, but the one thing that they share in common is a dedication to pushing the novel genre to remain new precisely by responding to new media.

By addressing the digital, however, the novel in the digital age also prompts consideration of how media and materiality matter to literature, both now and in the past. The so-called digital turn is not just a forward-reaching movement; it also promotes reflection on the material history of the novel as a genre and the role of media in its development. Textual and bibliographic studies as well as scholarship in the history of the book make it clear that different forms (editions) and formats (medial platforms) have an impact on the way a text is read, understood, and used.<sup>1</sup> The contemporary novel participates in this scholarly initiative by turning attention to literature's media, which includes, but is not limited to, the book.

Considering the novel in (and of) the digital age is not just about examining literature's relationship to contemporary media but also enables recognition of how media serve literature and literary studies more broadly. In what follows, I will concentrate on three case studies, each of which will expose the impact of digital technologies on the novel genre: (1) a massive bookish novel, (2) an updated version of the classic "it-narrative" that presents an inanimate object, the book, as its protagonist, and (3) a recent innovative work of born-digital literature. Reading these works together, I hope to show how the novel in the digital age compels us to reconsider what aesthetics, affective modes, and reading practices are made possible by digital methods of production, distribution, and reception. In the process, we also confront how book-based norms shape our expectations of the novel genre and consider how media mediate our experience of literature.

## The Big Bookish Novel

Some novels have responded to this digital turn by going big, proclaiming their continued importance through the sheer number of their physical pages. Recent work by writers such as William T. Vollmann, Roberto Bolaño, and Karen Tei Yamashita take up space on the shelf and demand that a reader commit to “deep attention” and the physical labor of holding a tome, not a tablet, in an age of “hyperattention.”<sup>2</sup> Big novels are, of course, nothing new. From eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sprawling and serialized novels to the heavy hitters of the twentieth-century experimental novel – a lineage that includes Fielding, Melville, Faulkner, and Stein as much as Joyce, Pynchon, Silko, and Wallace – the novel has always taken up space as a material artifact. But, at a time when data and scale are configured on databases and interfaces that don’t seem to possess any heft – when Google Books and the World Wide Web can contain the content of infinite bookshelves within a slick machine whose girth measures little less an inch in width – the physical presence of information becomes an ontological and epistemological subject as well as an aesthetic one. In this moment of big data and the disembodied digital “cloud,” the bigness of the print-based book-bound novel registers particular significance.

The contemporary trend toward bigness in novels is both an ironic and expected outcome of the book’s supposed obsolescence due to digital technologies. This paradox is exemplified in my first case study, a literary experiment in bringing back the nineteenth-century serial novel by using digital technologies to produce and market it. No other novel I know quite expresses the commitment to bigness as physical, conceptual, and hubristic ambition as Mark Z. Danielewski’s promise to publish an epic twenty-seven-volume serial narrative wherein each book is itself a massive tome. The first and second increments of this new series came out in 2015 and clocked in at over 800 pages each. New additions are planned at three-month increments for, and I repeat myself, twenty-seven total volumes.<sup>3</sup> *The Familiar*<sup>4</sup> employs the benefits of digital publishing technologies to adapt the production, distribution, and reception processes of the early novel for a contemporary digital readership that expects ever more searchable content beyond the text at hand. As *The Familiar* shows, the big novel mimics information overload in ways that resolutely proclaim that the novel is again made new – and thus remains ever novel.

Danielewski is the popular and critically acclaimed author of *House of Leaves* (2000), a novel that is big in its own right (over 700 pages) and also big in that it seemed to contain within itself anything that could possibly be written about it. His *Only Revolutions* (2006) was a slimmer volume but also

## The Novel in the Digital Age

strives to contain centuries of American history, literature, and paratextual content. The first volume of *The Familiar* series, *A Rainy Day in May*, presents its bigness in a different manner than the author’s previous works. Vol. 1: *A Rainy Day in May* contains a constellation of intersecting characters stretched out across wide geographic space – from LA to Mexico, Singapore to Texas – and a carefully designed page space, constrained within the temporal limits of one rainy day in May. The narrative traces a large group of seemingly disassociated characters spread out across the nodes in what must be (assumes the reader of the first book in this large-scale project) a network.

The fulcrum in the sprawling first volume is a smart and deeply feeling young girl, Xanther, who suffers from epilepsy. To fend off impending attacks, she pursues a strategy of taking her mind off of her problems by asking questions. Xanther endlessly asks acute and philosophical questions that often have no simple answers. These are not easy Google searches but complicated research questions. When asked, iteratively, by the novel’s central character, they suggest that this book is a type of database and that the reader is a user of it. Xanther is, to use the language of Google maps, the reader’s little pin; she gets dropped down in specific locales around Los Angeles and grounds us, bringing us back to the traditional kind of narrative we have grown to expect from the novel genre: psychologically deep and character driven. This is in stark contrast to some of the other sections in Vol. 1, one of which is narrated by Narcons, which read like artificial intelligence (AI) agents but are self-identified as “narrative constructs” from a galaxy far, far away. Xanther moves around Los Angeles on a long rainy day. She is driven around by her stepfather, a computer programmer who is working on something big in the realm of AI and game design; her mother and sisters shop for the necessary accoutrements for the expensive new dog that is intended to serve as a companion for Xanther to help soothe her anxiety. The novel spirals out around Xanther and her little world into multiple narrative threads, reaching across global and galactic space and, of course, out into potentially real and chronotopic timelines. But that’s just the narrative.

It is not just the content that is big and ambitious here. Readers have come to expect Danielewski to push the boundaries of book design and print-based poetics, and *The Familiar* does not disappoint. A faint, organic-looking gray pattern lines the gutter margins. The markings draw attention toward the innermost parts of the book’s spine and seem to present a visual metonym of an unfinished network that is only half visible and that evolves along with the reader’s progress. The top corners of each page (recto and verso) have brightly colored tips, and each color indexes a particular character’s narrative. The visual detail serves as a navigation tool for this book-based textual

web, allowing readers to use the codex as a random-access memory (RAM) device; a reader can flip to Xanther sections, for example, by following the orange corners. In typical Danielewski fashion, the typographic presentation of printed text on the page is also experimentally ambitious: from the layering on of parentheses into an arsenal and archive of selected fonts that differentiate various narratives within the novel to the concrete visual poems that appear on certain pages (one version depicts rain falling across the page comprised of streams of tiny words). There is more, much more, than I can describe here about how this novel aims for bigness in form, content, and ambition. But all of these practices are employed to showcase how the novel genre remains robust by creatively employing its media. Danielewski exploits the properties and possibilities of the book medium, particularly the book that is designed and printed through innovative digital technologies and practices. It is digital printing technologies that render those glossy, color-tipped pages and their numerous fonts affordable (around \$20 US).

Though *The Familiar* engages digital technologies for production and poetics, it also rebels against them or, rather, against the assumptions about the reading practices that they promote. One cannot simply lose oneself in this novel. You cannot quickly consume it. This novel requires “deep attention,” not “hyperattention” (again, see Hayles), and thus seems a throwback to a time before clickable content and endless remixes. As Lydia Millet writes in her review of the novel for the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Familiar* “asks its readers to return to a culture where instant gratification is neither offered nor expected.”<sup>5</sup> But this ambitious work does not simply reject digital reading practices and expectations. The possibility of making sense of the connections between so many characters over so much space (page space and geographic locations) requires a kind of a reading practice that draws from the digital: pattern recognition based on deciphering visual and semantic clues. We trace the numerous fonts and color-tipped pages to know which narrative we are reading, we apply digital competencies of reading nonlinear texts using hyperlinks, and we accept that an unfinished and potential narrative provides affective and aesthetic enjoyment. We can certainly imagine (and I will bet scholars are already at it) applying digital humanities practices of computational reading – data mining, pattern recognition, and information visualization – to understanding this text. Indeed, this book-bound novel begs digital reading practices. How else can one be expected to make sense of a narrative that sprawls across 22,000 pages? This big, ambitious project promotes book-based reading pleasures and expectations by showcasing how the book-bound novel is distinctly part of the digital information ecology. But *The Familiar* is not alone in exploiting its

## The Novel in the Digital Age

book-bound and bookish materiality to make us remember that literature has always been dependent on media.

### The It-Narrative Novel

My second example of the novel in the digital age stands in direct contrast to the bulk, heft, and ambition of Danielewski’s serialized project. *The House of Paper* (2005),<sup>6</sup> by Argentine writer Carlos María Domínguez (translated by Nick Castor and with fanciful illustrations by Peter Sis), is a lovely little book. This slim volume of only 100 pages contains a short but deceptively complex narrative about the power of books and our fascination with (and fetishization of) them. It is a bibliophile’s dream and nightmare, for it is a novel about how “books are dangerous,”<sup>7</sup> as the narrator’s German grandmother says and undoubtedly knows firsthand.

The novel centers on a mysterious book that finds our narrator after its intended recipient is hit by a car. The first sentence informs: as Bluma Lennon “reached the second poem on the first street corner, she was knocked down by a car.”<sup>8</sup> The novel quickly ventures to suggest that it is not the car that killed Bluma, a professor of literature, but the book she was reading. In this little novel, books are not just things to read but agents that act on us. “Books change people’s destinies,” the novel states; they prompt us “to become professors of literature in remote universities,” convert to Eastern philosophy, or, as the novel shows, something far worse.<sup>9</sup> After Bluma’s death, our narrator takes over her position in the Department of Hispanic Studies at Cambridge University and inherits a package intended for Bluma that is adorned with Uruguayan stamps. The package contains a paperback copy of Joseph Conrad’s *The Shadow-Line* marked by “a filthy crust on its front and back covers” and “a film of cement particles on the page edges.”<sup>10</sup> The strange object haunts the narrator: “no other book has affected me so much as that paperback, whose damp, warped pages seemed to be calling out to me.”<sup>11</sup> It is not Conrad’s story that affects the narrator, for he does not attempt to read the novel, let alone open the book; it is the monstrous “book thing” that so “upset the balance of the room” that the narrator feels compelled to travel to South America to seek the story behind this strange artifact and return it to its sender. The book, the novel tells us, “deserved to be returned to whoever had sent it.”<sup>12</sup> The object is described as a living thing, a character that acts and “deserves” actions in return. This book object, and not our human narrator, is the central character in *The House of Paper*, and this fact makes *The House of Paper* an “it-narrative,” a genre of fiction that turns an inanimate thing into a protagonist and follows that

thing as it moves across space and time, affecting animate and inanimate agents alike.

The it-narrative was popular in the eighteenth century but found a new emphasis and social importance in nineteenth-century England. Leah Price writes, "[w]hereas eighteenth-century it-narrative taught readers the rules governing cash and credit in a commercial society," the it-narratives of the nineteenth century "take on a narrower topic: how one very particular kind of consumer good – books – should be bought, sold, borrowed, disposed of."<sup>13</sup> The nineteenth-century it-narrative trained readers to own books by figuring books as things and commodities that could be used, shared, sold, and gifted. Specifically, as Price explains, nineteenth-century it-narratives redirected awareness of books from things produced to things consumed: "[i]n the process, the novel's bookishness – its allusions to the material forms that it takes and the social transactions that it occasions – goes from exemplifying the reader's labor to instancing the buyer's passivity."<sup>14</sup> In this way, the novel genre served as a form of metafiction and social pedagogy about the emergence of mass-produced books and the new range of middle-class readers who could own them. The nineteenth-century it-narrative thus supported a cultural shift in identifying a book as a medium to understanding it as an artifact and commodity.

The copy of *The Shadow Line* in Domínguez's novel is truly an "it," a monstrous thing. It crosses the Atlantic to arrive at Cambridge University and beckons our narrator to travel with it back to his native Argentina, to cross the ocean in order to chase the history of this circulated thing. In Buenos Aires, the narrator learns not the publication history or interpretive meaning of the text contained within this book but the backstory of the artifact itself, the itinerary of its past movements. Here it is: when a brilliant book collector loses himself to his own bibliophilia – when he begins talking to his books and sleeping with "twenty or so books carefully laid out in such a way that they reproduced the mass and outline of a human body" – he then disappears and takes his vast and expensive book collection with him.<sup>15</sup> He buys a plot of land by the sea and builds a house made completely out of books. He "turn[s] his books into bricks," using them solely for their physical and material qualities: "[a]ll he worried about was their size, their thickness, how resistant their covers might be to lime, cement and sand."<sup>16</sup> No longer media for reading, the book objects in his collection are taken out of circulation as commodities in the usual marketplaces, either as books sold to readers or as collectable objects purchased for preservation. Fascinated by the story of this reader-collector-contractor, the narrator journeys to the apocryphal spot and finds that "[t]he books were there, they were still there," indeed, "in their tomb of sand."<sup>17</sup> The books are depicted as bodies,

not just commodities rejected from the system of use or as fetishized objects that refer to it, but as living, dying, and decomposing beings.

*The House of Paper* is an it-narrative for the digital age. It updates the nineteenth-century version of the it-narrative, which inducted bourgeois buyers/readers into the marketplace of literature, to serve a twenty-first-century concern about the fate of books in the digital age. Price sees the it-narrative as something quite different from the traditional *bildungsroman*, which centers on the psychological development and education of a person, in part, because the it-narrative "reveals what the bildungsroman conceals: the backstory by which books reach their readers."<sup>18</sup> The it-narrative places the object, rather than the human, at the center of relations and actions. "Nothing could be further from the fantasy of the self-made reader," Price writes, "than the it-narrative's understanding of books as vectors for human relationships."<sup>19</sup> This understanding of the it-narrative is particularly suited to a contemporary culture in which social networking happens through computer systems and algorithms. The object-oriented paradigm of it-narratives also seems particularly attuned to recent critical movements such as Object-Oriented Ontology and other critiques of anthropocentrism that seek to reconsider the role of inanimate actors in networks of influence.<sup>20</sup> The digital age is that of biotechnology, AI, and virtuality, wherein the boundaries between animate and inanimate objects blur and raise questions about what counts as human and what constitutes life. This book-bound novel from 2005 employs the it-narrative to focus attention (even fetishistic attention) on the object most associated with literature's human-centered genre, the novel.

*The House of Paper* is a homage to the book in the digital age, an age when books seemed threatened by the digital. Though digital technologies do not appear in the pages of this novel, *The House of Paper* is decidedly about the power and status of the book. The "it" at the center of this it-narrative is a powerful character not because of the content of this paperback novel but because of its presence. No one in this novel actually reads the book in the it-narrative; we are told that Bluma gifted it to the bibliophile collector-turned-house-constructor, who then sent it back to Bluma, where it reached our narrator after Bluma's death – but we are never told that anyone actually reads it. The book is not presented as a medium for reading; it is powerful just by being there. In *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times*, Andrew Piper adapts Gertrude Stein's line "book was there" to point out that physicality and presence are part of the history of books and the experience of reading them.<sup>21</sup> Piper writes, "[i]t is this thereness that is both essential for understanding the medium of the book (that books exist as finite objects in the world) and also for reminding us that we cannot think about our



electronic future without contending with its antecedent, the bookish past.<sup>22</sup> This “thereness” is part of the big, bookish presence I am discussing here, which contemporary novelists pursue with acuity. The “thereness” of the particular book in Dominguez’s novel – a book that has survived encrust-cement, traveled across thousands of miles, and has undergone who knows what other challenging circumstances – allegorically represents the survival of the book medium in the digital age. *The House of Paper* stubbornly asserts the continued “thereness” and “it-ness” of the book into the digital age. The fact that *The House of Paper* is one of many recent it-narratives whose central character is a book suggests that the it-narrative is making a resurgence and points to the changing status of the book – as object, metaphor, and commodity – in our contemporary digital moment.<sup>23</sup>

### The Digital Novel

The book may survive in the digital age, but it will do so alongside other formats for the novel genre. My third case study is a novel that exploits the affordances of digital technologies for producing, presenting, and distributing a novel. *Pry* (2015)<sup>24</sup> is an app-based novella for digital touch screens. It is “born-digital” electronic literature, meaning that its computational processes are part of its poetics. This is not digitized text; it cannot be printed out or read on a Kindle. You will see what I mean momentarily. Created by the collective known as Tender Claws, which is comprised of Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro, *Pry* is purchased as an app that you download to your iPad or similar device, but reading this work challenges recently established expectations of e-readers. One does not simply “turn the page” with a swipe of the finger or scroll down the sidebar. Such readerly gestures, which are themselves remediated from the interactions with the codex and prebook interfaces, are discarded by this innovative work, thrown out along with the pixelated bathwater of expectations about digital literature.

Reading *Pry* requires performing its title and central metaphor. You read *Pry* by using your forefinger and thumb to pry open or pinch closed a virtual window, a space on the surface of the screen. Doing so produces a change onscreen wherein text appears beneath the immediate reading surface (see Figure 14.1).

Reading between the lines is literalized as an activity, giving the reader the sense that she is diving deep into the story, which is particularly poetic and ironic because this reading machine (the iPad or tablet) is flat. Unlike a book, the reading medium that inspired depth-based metaphors of readings, the digital tablet is not comprised of physical layers or, of course, paper pages. Reading by prying, or reading as prying, also rhetorically references the

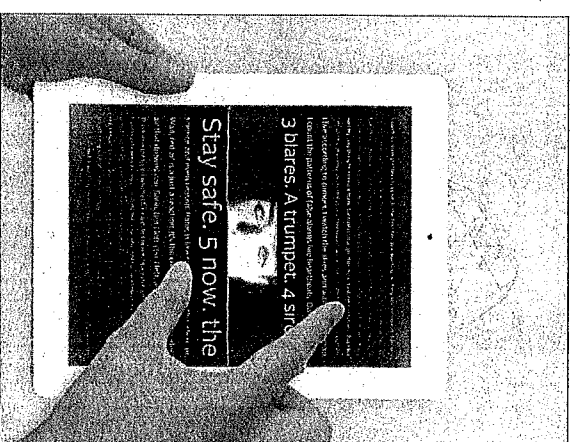


Figure 14.1: Reading by prying open a window in the interface of Tender Claws's *Pry* (2015). Image used with permission.

voyeuristic desire at the heart of reading novels. We pry into the lives of others when we read novels, and *Pry* programs this impulse – and the ultimate ambition of the novel genre – into its navigation system. In *Pry*, we pry open a portal to someone else's innermost thoughts, their unconscious. The mind we pry into here is that of a young veteran of the Persian Gulf War who is suffering from posttraumatic stress. It is an uncomfortable place to be, made more so by the novel's use of multimodal and media storytelling.

*Pry* begins with a cinematic prologue that you watch. The short film is slow moving and mostly wordless. It depicts a young man, our protagonist, in a suburban house preparing to go to war. He carefully packs his duffel bag before joining a driver, presumably his father, in a car that will then take him far away from home. Old home movies are sliced into the slick scene; the scratchy old video depicts a mother standing by her toddler son as he plays with a big ball and a dog at her feet. The prologue then speeds up and shifts to scenes depicting our protagonist at war, wearing military fatigues and relaxing with two peers in a sandy desert. The images from war move increasingly faster, pushing toward visceral discomfort before the chapter ends in darkness.

When Chapter 1, “Below and Above,” begins, six years have passed, and we are again in darkness. The film is shot in black and white this time, and it opens with our protagonist lying face up on a hotel bed, staring at the ceiling

with eyes that suggest fiery color and fearful depth. This is James, and as the chapter plays, he does not move, but we readers do. We pry with our fingers to access his thoughts: memories of the desert and a young female soldier who seems to flirt, not with James, but with the third soldier. This action seems to upset James. We see all of this as the film plays. Then the screen goes black, and white text appears on it: "Awake, but not fully. What time is it? Check." A caption in the bottom-right-hand corner informs us to "Spread over the white asbestos-encrusted ceiling. This is again replaced by the black screen with white words centered on it: "Right, can't move." A new set of captions: "Pinch and hold closed to access James' subconscious." When we pinch and hold, we see a montage of images from an optometrist's office: vision tests and optical instruments that suggest that James, whose subconscious we have invaded, is suffering the onset of blindness and is traumatized by this fact. So here we are, in a hotel room with a young veteran suffering from insomnia and flashbacks as well as the onset of blindness. Here we are, left to read by prying and pinching to encounter a novel "below and above" the surface of a character's liminal consciousness. We readers of this digital novel find ourselves immersed in a work that demands that we engage multiple senses and navigational modes as well as methods of interpretation in order to access and appreciate a novel produced through digital technologies, a novel that is also about the digital age. I will linger on this latter point momentarily to show how *Pry* is not only distinctly digital in its performance but also diegetically about the impact of digital technologies, videogames in particular, on human (and particularly American) consciousness.

Though I have been describing *Pry* as a novel, it is both a novel and a game. It has been recognized with awards in both genre categories,<sup>25</sup> and it clearly blurs the boundaries between them. *Pry* contains many aspects of game play, including a built-in reward system that bestows glittering reddish diamonds when certain content is accessed. In addition to this reward system for reading, the novel's appendix (titled "Album") is a veritable "Easter egg" (to use the language of games), which changes and divulges different content based on how many of the chapters the reader completes. These reward-system completion strategies come to the novel from the world of games. In *Pry*, gaming is reading, and reading a novel is a game.

*Pry* not only imitates an aesthetic of game play, but it also suggests how deeply videogames impact American consciousness, particularly when it comes to war. The novel depicts James playing war games on his Gameboy during downtimes in Desert Storm. Videogames are part of his wartime experience and his coping mechanism for fighting actual war. *Pry* juxtaposes

images of James' Gameboy, with its chartreuse green and black screen, to the CNN video footage of the Persian Gulf War that streamed into the living rooms of American families during the conflict. The iconic images of Baghdad at night are now part of American history and consciousness: flickering green lights against a black sky, an abstracted city at night, before bright flashes punctuate the darkness and show bombs dropped by American forces that appear like fireworks in the sky. The Persian Gulf War has been called the "videogame war" because media coverage of the war employed new satellite technology to broadcast "live" the bombing operations of Operation Desert Storm and because the war inspired many actual videogames. *Pry* shows a feedback loop between the aesthetic of the real, live footage from the war and the interface aesthetics of early videogames.<sup>26</sup> This blurring of real and virtual war games in the early 1990s is part of the foundational history of contemporary American involvement in the Middle East and the history of our relationship with games. It is also a central source of conflict for *Pry*'s disturbed protagonist.

*Pry* is a war novel that uses digital technologies to explore the relationship between videogames and war. Since we read this novel by playing it, using our thumb and index finger to navigate the threatening terrain of a young man's mind, *Pry* also prompts us to consider the moral implications of the desires that compel the reading (and playing) of novels and games. Approaching *Pry* as a war novel illuminates the fact that though there is much new and novel about this work, particularly how we read it, there is also much that is quite familiar. *Pry* returns to rather traditional topoi of the novel genre: unrequited love, loss, and betrayal. More specifically, *Pry* explores the trauma of a mother's abandonment (that central psychoanalytic plot device), the desire to rewind time so as to halt death and stave off survivor guilt, and the acute awareness that human memory is prone to mutation and loss. The work also uses digital technologies to update that narrative mode made famous by modernist novels: stream of consciousness. *Pry* employs multimedia to present human consciousness as multimodal and to stream it at paces that, unlike print literature, often exceed the comprehension of a reader's cognition. The changes can be challenging, and the challenge is part of the point. We need to learn to navigate, play, and read this novel and literature like it. *Pry* pries open our eyes to confront our book-based assumptions about novels and how we read them. When we do open our eyes, we can see and appreciate how this novel participates in and updates literary tradition and the novel genre in particular. *Pry* propels readers to renew their understanding of what a novel is, what it can do, and how we read it.

## Conclusion

Though the three works examined in this chapter are each quite different – in size, style, and the types of reading practices they elicit – they are each exemplary of the novel in the digital age. Collectively, they show that the contemporary novel is attentive to its status and purpose as well as its materiality. If one thing unites these works, it is their focus on literature's media. *The Familiar* glorifies its bulk and exploits the physical materiality of the book medium; *The House of Paper* tells a meta-reflexive it-narrative about the power and endurance of books; and *Pry* employs digital technologies to update ways of reading even as it satisfies traditional desires for the novel genre. Taken together, these contemporary novels turn our attention to the media-specific aspects of the novel genre, present and past.

In our introduction to *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*, N. Katherine Hayles and I write: “[a]s the era of print is passing, it is possible once again to see print in a comparative context with other textual media.”<sup>27</sup> The novels I examined here all demonstrate this point. In their formal aesthetics, narrative content, and medial platforms, these works prompt consideration of how the novel genre, and literary studies more broadly, is not just about form and content but also about format and artifact. With stories that are not limited to linguistic and textual signifiers and platforms that are not limited to books, these works make materiality hard to ignore and thus invite us to read them with a focus on media and format. As these case studies show, the contemporary novel operates in a complex medial ecology that informs all aspects of the literary experience. Recognizing the inseparable relationship between literature and media prompts us to consider the longer history of the novel *via* this so-called digital turn and also to recognize, as the novel in the digital age demonstrates, literary studies as media studies.

## NOTES

1. Consider important work by Jerome McGann, from *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*, Princeton University Press, 1993, to *The Textual Condition*, Princeton University Press, 1991, and also, particularly on the use of books, Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian England*, Princeton University Press, 2012.
2. N. Katherine Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” in *Profession* (2007), pp. 187–99.
3. On February 2, 2018, Mark Z. Danielewski posted to his Facebook page that *The Familiar* series would pause at volume 6.
4. Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Familiar: A Rainy Day in May*, Random House, 2015.

5. Lydia Millet, “Review: Mark Z. Danielewski’s ‘Familiar’ a Monument to Semantic Encryption,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2015, available at [www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-mark-danielewski-20150510-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-mark-danielewski-20150510-story.html).
6. Carlos María Domínguez, *The House of Paper*, trans. Nick Castor, Harcourt, 2005.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
13. Price, *How to Do Things with Books*, p. 110.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Domínguez, *The House of Paper*, p. 54.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
19. *Ibid.*
20. On object-oriented ontology, see Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*, Zero Books, 2010; for a different approach to critiquing anthropocentric thinking, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2005.
21. Andrew Piper, *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times*, University of Chicago Press, 2012.
22. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
23. *The House of Paper* is not alone in adapting the it-narrative for the contemporary age. I have written elsewhere (see Jessica Pressman, “Whither American Fiction?” in *Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, ed. John Duvall, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 256–64) about Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows’ *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* (2008) as an it-narrative. There are others, too. Consider Nicole Krauss’ *The History of Love*, Stéphane Audeguy’s *A Theory of Clouds*, Geraldine Brooks’ *People of the Book*, and even Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, which, if not outright it-narratives, are pretty close and are all published since 2000.
24. Tender Claws, *Pry*, 2015, app for iPhone/iPad.
25. Such genre-bending awards include a finalist for Independent Games Festival Award in “Excellence in Narrative,” a finalist from Future of Storytelling, “Apple’s Top 25 iPhone Apps” in 2015, and the Robert Coover Award for Best Creative Work of Electronic Literature from the Electronic Literature Organization (2015).
26. For more on the war as simulacra, see Jean Baudrillard’s infamous *La Guerre du Golfe n’a pas eu lieu* (*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*) (1991).
27. N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman, *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*, University of Minnesota Press, 2013, p. vii.