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Staggered transmissions: Twitter and the return of serialized literature

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Abstract

The final part of the recent anthology *Serialization in Popular Culture* (2014) is called ‘Digital serialization’ and is devoted to ‘the influence of digital technologies on serial form.’ The chapters throughout the anthology focus on modern serial phenomena such as TV series and computer games, but apart from a chapter on serial fiction in the 19th Century, literature is conspicuously absent. However, the digital revolution has also left its mark on literature and given rise to new publishing strategies, including a resurgence of different forms of serialization.

Some of the most notable examples of digital serial fiction are published via Twitter, and through analyses of recent Twitter stories by Jennifer Egan and David Mitchell the article discusses how the micro-serialization of Twitter fiction both differs from and draws on the pre-digital tradition of serial fiction. In order to address these differences and similarities, the analyses focus on two interrelated aspects of serialization, temporality and interaction. Furthermore, they discuss the promotional dimension of Twitter fiction that arises as the financial dictates of legacy publishing intersect with fiction distributed via digital social media.

Keywords

Twitter fiction, serialized literature, temporality, interactive fiction, transmedia storytelling, Jennifer Egan, David Mitchell

Introduction: Serialized culture

Modern media culture is to a large extent serialized culture. A significant proportion of today's most popular cultural products are delivered to their audiences in instalments rather than as complete and self-contained works of art. The book market in the last couple of decades has been dominated by serial phenomena such as J. K. Rowling's seven *Harry Potter* novels (1997-2007), Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) and E. L. James's *Fifty Shades* trilogy (2011-2012) – in itself a spin-off from Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005-2008). Most blockbuster films are instalments in larger series, either as adaptations of successful book series or as chapters in ongoing media franchises like *Star Wars* and *Batman*. With such critically acclaimed dramas as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Breaking Bad* (2008-13) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015), television series have undergone a remarkable artistic and popular renaissance and figure prominently in the range of visual entertainment on offer from streaming services such as Netflix and HBO. Comic books and the gaming industry likewise rely heavily on serialization, and the most widely discussed podcast in recent years was aptly titled *Serial* (2014). The logic of serialization even informs business models outside the cultural field. New iPhones and IOS updates are emphatically marketed as parts of ongoing series, and in 2015 Apple introduced their iPhone Upgrade Program: a subscription service where customers receive the newest iPhone every year in exchange for a not so modest monthly fee.

The financial impetus behind serialization seems clear. By delivering their products piecemeal to consumers, one book/movie/episode/phone at a time, cultural and other producers can generate eager anticipation between each instalment and create a sense of loyalty among their customer base. As a result of these obvious pecuniary motives, serialization is often considered to be inextricably linked with popular culture. The titles of Routledge's recent anthology *Serialization in Popular Culture* and of the European research project *Popular Seriality* speak clearly of this prevalent conception, and the history of serialized literature itself contributes to the notion. The gothic penny

dreadfuls of the Victorian age, the rip-roaring westerns printed in the pulp magazine *Argosy* in the early 20th century and the melodramatic space operas serialized in the science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* in the postwar period all belong squarely to the category of genre fiction. In spite of this heritage it would be wrong, however, only to equate serialization with popular culture. In the heyday of serial literature (roughly 1850 to 1920), the novels of many important authors were also published in serial form. Charles Dickens and Alexandre Dumas are some of the most well-known examples of authors whose works were initially presented to the public in sequential instalments, but such literary classics as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) were also originally published serially. Even James Joyce's modernist masterpiece *Ulysses* (1922) was first published in 23 instalments in the American magazine *The Little Review* from 1918 to 1920, until the editors were forced to discontinue the serialization due to charges of obscenity.

For a number of reasons, the serialization of literature has become less common since the Second World War. The media landscape has changed, and many of the printed magazines and newspapers that previously housed serial fiction have been forced out of business by electronic media. As argued above, the serial logic has survived in publishing in the shape of popular book series, but the systematic publication of individual novels or short stories in small segments has become rare to such an extent that David Barr Kirtley claims that 'serialized fiction has all but disappeared' from print media (Kirtley, 2012: n.p.). Hillary Kelly similarly states that the novel 'is now decidedly a single object, a mass entity packaged and moved as a whole' (Kelly, 2015: n.p.). As a reflection of this development, the editors of *Serialization in Popular Culture* centre their brief discussion of serialized literature on the late 19th century, arguing that the serial logic developed in the Victorian Age has had a significant influence on the development of modern mass media (Allen and van den Berg, 2014: 1). However, the digital revolution has provided literature with new modes of delivery and given rise to new publishing strategies,¹ including a marked resurgence of different forms of

serialization. These forms include multimodal storytelling experiments like the ongoing *Inanimate Alice* (2005-2016) and app-driven stories such as *The Pickle Index* (2015), which delivers its chapters one day at a time. An even more rapid delivery of content characterizes digitally born modes of micro-serialization such as cell phone novels and Twitter fiction, where the intervals between separate instalments can often be measured in minutes.

In her article ‘140 Characters in Search of a Story’ Bronwen Thomas analyses selected Twitter stories and discusses how their narrative strategies are informed by the affordances of the medium through which they are delivered. Her discussion goes a long way towards establishing a solid theoretical and methodological framework for understanding the phenomenon of Twitter fiction, and in the following I shall draw on some of her arguments while also exploring new avenues of approach. While the stories analysed by Thomas – Arjun Basu’s ‘Twisters’ and Chindu Sreedharan’s *Epicretold* – are written by lesser known authors whose literary endeavours primarily unfold on Twitter, I draw my examples from established writers with a successful career in legacy publishing: Jennifer Egan and David Mitchell. These authors are not chosen because their Twitter stories are inherently more interesting than those published by less established writers, but because they will allow me to discuss the promotional aspects that arise as the financial dictates of legacy publishing intersect with fiction on social media (which can usually be enjoyed free of charge).

Besides discussing these crucial economic aspects, I will elaborate on Thomas’s work of analyzing how the affordances of the Twitter format affect the composition, structure and delivery of the emerging narrative form. More specifically, I will focus on how the logic of serialization shapes the stories by Egan and Mitchell in very different ways. Thomas limits her investigation of Twitter’s serial aspects to stories that ‘retell classic tales and epics of various kinds’ (as indicated by the title of her primary case, *Epicretold*), and her discussion therefore revolves around serialization as an ‘opportunity to relive these stories via Twitter’ (Thomas, 2014: 100). Rather than old stories retold

in a new medium, my chosen examples were born as Twitter stories, and their readers therefore have as little knowledge of where events are headed as the impatient American readers of Charles Dickens's serialized novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1841) who famously stormed the piers in New York City and shouted to arriving British sailors 'Is Little Nell alive?' (Skenazy, 2007: n.p.).

Kirtley also likens Jennifer Egan's Twitter story 'Black Box' to the serialized novels of Dickens and suggests that Twitter fiction heralds a digital 'return of serial fiction' (Kirtley, 2012: n.p.). This is a valid assumption, but the many similarities between Twitter fiction and pre-digital serial fiction are tempered by an equal number of differences. As Desrochers and Apollon have argued, digital fiction often mingles 'continuity elements' inherited from print culture with 'disruption elements' from new technological media (Desrochers and Apollon, 2014: xxx), and my analyses will address both continuity elements and disruption elements of Twitter fiction. Particular attention will be given to two important interrelated aspects of serialization, temporality and interaction. By comparing the temporal dimensions of Twitter publication with earlier forms of serialization and by discussing the various degrees of interaction made possible by this temporality, I will challenge some of the still prevalent notions of how print and digital culture differ from each other.

This article thus traces how the narrative, transmissive and economic aspects of Twitter fiction intersect, and it discusses how the resultant stories both resemble and depart from the serialized fiction of print publishing. Such a discussion calls for a multifocal approach of the kind outlined by the editors of *Analyzing Digital Fiction* (Bell et al., 2014: 6-7), and my analyses will therefore both draw on narrative theory, theories of new media and publishing studies. Before proceeding to my two case studies, however, I will briefly situate the phenomenon of Twitter fiction in a larger literary field.

Twitter fiction: a liberating straitjacket

In 'A [s]creed for digital fiction' (2010), six media scholars concisely define digital fiction as 'fiction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium' (Bell et al., 2010: n.p.). Twitter fiction certainly falls under this basic definition, but it also has strong roots in print literature, especially the serialized stories of the Victorian age and short literary formats such as haiku poems and flash fiction. As such, it is situated somewhere between what Ellen McCracken calls 'avant-garde digital literature' (digital literature experimenting with code, algorithms and hypertextual pathways) and 'transitional electronic literature [...] – electronic texts that mimic the format and appearance of print books and add a few innovations' (McCracken, 2013: 105). Like the avant-garde experiments described by McCracken, Twitter fiction is 'digital born' (105), but in its reliance on often very recognizable literary modes of expression, it offers narrative and poetic pleasures akin to those found in more traditional literature.

That Twitter should even be considered a possible medium for literature is not self-evident. Literature – especially in printed form – is usually regarded as an art form that is characterized by complexity, that looks 'past surfaces into interiors' (Franzen, 1996: 52) and that demands concentration and 'deep attention' (Hayles, 2007: 187) over long stretches of time. The short format (140 characters) and rapid exchanges of Twitter would seem to work against such literary virtues, and prominent fiction writers have taken Twitter to the task for its perceived superficiality. The American novelist Jonathan Franzen considers Twitter 'unspeakably irritating' and has branded it as 'the ultimate irresponsible medium' (Flood, 2012: n.p.). Many literary authors with less animosity toward digital culture than Franzen are present on Twitter to promote their work,² but they still rarely use the medium as a platform for fiction. While much narrative labour is carried out daily on Twitter

by ordinary users and by the thriving net.art scene, established authors mostly publish their work in more habitual ways, and Twitter so far mainly serves as an extension of the paratexts surrounding their fiction.

Franzen's critique of Twitter is tinged with a conservative technophobia that contrasts the superficiality and creative constraints of new media with the rich complexity of the printed novel. But even if we acknowledge that the shortness of a tweet imposes certain limits on artistic expression, it would not be the first time that literary authors have worked under self-imposed constraints. The traditional Japanese haiku poem is just as restrictive in its inflexible demand that each poem consist of exactly 17 syllables, and the formal experiments of Oulipo writers such as Georges Perec and Raymond Queneau were frequently characterized by similar rigid rules. Such precedents show that brevity does not necessarily equal lack of literary quality, and they demonstrate that straitjackets can sometimes turn out to be liberating. Furthermore, the natural constraints of the format are offset by the speedy delivery and potential reach of each individual tweet. Readers of Twitter serials can receive the latest micro-installment instantaneously wherever they are (as long as they are within mobile coverage). Victorian publishers and authors could only dream of such reach, and an increasing number of contemporary authors have realized the potential of Twitter as a platform for not only promotion of fiction, but for fiction itself.

Thinking outside the box

In the early summer of 2012, the American author Jennifer Egan's Twitter story 'Black Box' was serialized over ten nights via *The New Yorker's* Twitter profile for fiction (@NYerFiction). Each night between 8 and 9 PM the story was delivered to its readers in a strictly regulated rhythm of one tweet per minute, and one week later it was published in printed form in *The New Yorker's* Science Fiction Issue for which it effectively served as an advertisement. The story features a couple of

characters from Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), and it can therefore additionally be considered a way of reactualizing and thus prolonging the life span of that novel. Michael Rudin argues that Twitterature by authors with careers in legacy publishing allows them 'to galvanize and grow' their 'traditional audience' (Rudin, 2011: n.p.), and while such secondary motives do not detract from the aesthetic pleasures offered free of charge, they should not be discounted (as it were). While the action of the novel unfolds in a largely realistic setting, 'Black Box' depicts an exotic futuristic universe of spies and advanced technologies. The main character, Lulu (whom we first encounter in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* as a media-savvy 9-year-old girl), is a so-called citizen agent who has been tasked with gathering intelligence to prevent a terrorist attack. In the novel Lulu is such an avid user of her smartphone and other digital media that she has effectively merged with them, but in 'Black Box' this figurative marriage between humans and technology is fully consummated as she has a number of technological devices (camera, microphone, data port etc.) surgically implanted in her body. Rather than merely a user of digital media, Lulu has finally become a medium herself, a black box whose true mission is to record data for her nameless superiors to decode.

One of several appliances embedded in the cyborg-like Lulu is a chip beneath her hairline which records her thoughts and serves as a mission log. This chip reflects the story's thematic treatment of the merging of man and technology, but it also serves as a structural device, since the story basically consists of these individual thoughts. In a text leading up to the story's publication, Egan discusses this attempt to create an enunciative situation suited for Twitter:

I'd [...] been wondering about how to write fiction whose structure would lend itself to serialization on Twitter. This is not a new idea, of course, but it's a rich one – because of the intimacy of reaching people through their phones, and because of the odd poetry that can happen in a hundred and forty

characters. I found myself imagining a series of terse mental dispatches from a female spy of the future [...]. (Egan, 2012a: n.p.)

Egan's description of the story's tweets as 'terse mental dispatches' from Lulu is by and large a fitting one, but it does not adequately capture the complexity of the story's situation of utterance. The majority of the tweets employ present-tense, second-person narration, e.g. 'A stunned expression reveals that your host expected the use of utensils' (Egan, 2012b: n.p.), and this unusual form of narration can be understood as Lulu's recorded observations to herself during the dangerous mission: 'For clearest results, mentally speak the thought, as if talking to yourself' (ibid.). However, Lulu's running advice to herself is sometimes interrupted by other voices speaking in first-person plural: 'We can't tell you in advance what direction relief will come from' or 'We ask that you allow our Therapeutic Agents, rather than those in the general population, to address your needs' (ibid.). Clearly, Lulu's superiors also have access to the chip and use it to send her Field Instructions that intermingle with her own recorded mental dispatches. 'Black Box' constitutes a discursive space with several different voices vying for attention, and this polyphony has much in common with the average Twitter feed that also consists of various voices weaving in and out of each other. The enunciative situation of Egan's story is thus closely aligned with the medium for which it was composed.

The affordances of Twitter have also been integrated at the stylistic level of the story. 'Black Box' is a long linear narrative that has to strike a balance between the individual parts and the whole. Such a balance is not necessary to the same degree when narratives are published in book or magazine form. Naturally, many authors still attempt to polish each sentence in a story, but from the outset the sentences appear as parts of a larger structure and need not necessarily be able to stand on their own. In 'Black Box' each tweet likewise functions as part of a longer narrative flow, but the paratactic mode of delivery also dictates that it shall stand on its own for a full minute until the next tweet is released. Egan manages this feat quite successfully. In the quote above she invokes 'the odd poetry

than can happen in a hundred and forty characters', and with their evocative, haiku-like imagery many of the individual tweets of 'Black Box' do indeed possess lyrical qualities:³ Tweets such as 'The Mediterranean is vast enough to have once seemed infinite' or 'The moon can seem as expressive as a face' do not drive the story forward but mainly serve to evoke a feeling or create a certain mood. Other tweets almost amount to one-line jokes, just as they play a more direct part in the narrative of Lulu's increasingly dangerous mission: 'Homes of the violent rich have excellent first-aid cabinets' or 'A man disabled by an elbow blow will have little reaction to infant cries' (ibid.). Such jokes provide comic relief, but they also move the story forward as long as we translate their almost aphoristic nature into concrete descriptions of what happens to Lulu here and now. The rhetorical register of the story spans from poetry and jokes to philosophical observations and neutral descriptions, and most of the pieces in this stylistic mosaic manage to have their own payoff in accordance with the logic of the Twitter format, even while they contribute in various ways to the unfolding story of Lulu's adventures.

The narrative drive of 'Black Box' is further strengthened by its genre traits. Egan has stated that one of the ideas behind the Twitter experiment was to 'take a character from a naturalistic story and travel with her into a different genre' (Egan, 2012a: n.p.), and with its action-packed story of Lulu's spying mission 'Black Box' is clearly patterned on popular spy thrillers by authors like Robert Ludlum and Dan Brown. The plots of such novels usually exhibit a strong narrative momentum towards a violent climax, and by drawing on the familiar codes of the genre, Egan creates similar expectations in her readers. Even though the plot is broken into discrete tweets, the genre of the story thus activates a strong narrative desire that counteracts the sense of fragmentation. In accordance with the theories formulated by Peter Brooks (1984) and Frank Kermode (1967), readers of Egan's staggered spy thriller still read for the plot, drawn by a strong sense of an ending. This sense is strengthened by the fact that the exact moment of the ending was announced with the publishing

schedule. Unlike the open-ended *Epicretold* analysed by Thomas, readers of the original transmission of 'Black Box' knew exactly when the story would end, and in that sense the reading experience can be likened to that of reading a printed book, where the gradual transferral of pages from the right to the left hand similarly tells the reader that the end is nigh.

The delicate balancing act between poetic fragmentation and narrative flow is thus aided by the genre expectations and the pre-announced ending, but it is also the result of careful composition on Egan's part. 'Black Box' was not written on the spur of the moment but was composed by hand over the course of a whole year,⁴ and while this meticulous manner of composition is evident in the finely honed end product, it is somewhat at odds with the spontaneity and fast pace that usually characterizes Twitter. These characteristics of the medium also affect the reading situation. While the individual tweets of Egan's story reward contemplation, the affordances of Twitter as well as the technical medium through which the tweets are accessed potentially work against this focused contemplation. If readers accessed the story through their individualized Twitter feeds, the micro-installments of 'Black Box' were mixed with tweets from the other persons followed by each reader, and this chorus of voices had to compete for the reader's attention with all the other possible activities offered by the smartphone or the tablet. These surrounding distractions are certainly not unique to digitally distributed literature. The instalments of most serialized novels of the Victorian age were also embedded in a larger discursive space of e.g. newspaper articles, advertisements for hair tonics and letters to the editor. These potentially distracting elements were not individualized like our personal smartphones (where the specific configuration of apps and settings means that no two readers are diverted in exactly the same way),⁵ and they were not as intrusive as incoming phone calls or text messages, but they could nevertheless lead the eye astray. N. Katherine Hayles has argued that the current networked mediascape has caused a shift in cognitive styles from a 'deep attention' associated with traditional print culture to the 'hyper attention' of an age of multiple information

streams (Hayles, 2007: 187). She specifically invokes the Victorian novels of Dickens as objects that demand concentration ‘for long periods’ (ibid.), but in their original serialized form, Dickens’s novels were also surrounded by ‘multiple information streams’ and distracted reading is hardly an exclusive feature of the digital age (just as full immersion in a narrative experience is not exclusive to the age of print).⁶ In an attempt to modify Hayles’s equation of deep and hyper attention with print culture and the digital age, respectively, Scott Rettberg has argued that ‘no literary medium [is] more suited to straddling the divide between hyper attention and deep attention than electronic literature’ (quoted in Bell et al., 2014: 7), but such an argument only serves to reify the distinction between print and digital fiction, implying that electronic literature is somehow a more flexible literary medium than its printed equivalent.

In both its treatment of the close relations between humans and technology and its fragmented yet unitary structure, ‘Black Box’ is clearly informed by the affordances of Twitter and the smartphone medium. It is no longer a given that literature is composed for and published in the book medium, and in their timely revision of Robert Darnton’s communications circuit⁷ for the digital age, Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires include the technological devices through which readers access literature in their ‘digital publishing communications circuit’ (Murray and Squires, 2013: 8). They choose to place the device in relation to the readers who close the circuit, but Twitter stories and other literary experiments with new digital media show that the device could just as easily be placed in relation to the author, whose composition of the text is similarly influenced by the device for which it is intended.

While the logic of Twitter has shaped Egan’s story in various fruitful ways, only a subset of the format’s possibilities have been employed in the writing and distribution of the story, and as argued in the preceding analysis, certain aspects of ‘Black Box’ (e.g. the painstaking composition) even struggle against the conventions of Twitter. The temporality of the original delivery also seems

to be at odds with both the narrative situation and the intended audience. The story of Lulu's mission unfolds in real time during a single night, and Twitter seems perfectly suited to capture this real-time aspect of the story, since tweets are often spontaneous responses to something happening right now. Drawing on Margolin's notion of 'concurrent narration' Thomas has argued that Twitter fiction often provides readers with a sequence of 'NOW moments' (Thomas, 2014: 97), and Lulu's present-tense mental dispatches initially seem to constitute just such an immersive series of moments. However, the temporality of the telling clashes with that of the told, and the pre-announced and tightly regulated publication schedule destroys any illusion that we are receiving messages from an operative in the field. As I have argued elsewhere, a similar tension characterizes the distribution of 'Black Box' during prime time (Andersen, 2015: 126). Prime time broadcasting belongs to an age before streaming services and podcasts, and the transmission of a Twitter story over ten nights between 8 and 9 PM asks us to behave like media users of an earlier age. Perhaps the regular schedule even asks us to behave like 19th century readers of a serialized Dickens novel who knew exactly when the next instalment could be expected.

As noted in the introduction, an important aspect of serial fiction has always been the matter of interaction between readers and the ongoing work. Dickens actively sought out the reactions of his readers during the composition of his serialized novels, and the temporal gap between each instalment allowed him to adjust the planned course of the story in response to these reactions (Davies, 1983: 166-69). If anything, Twitter is likewise eminently suited for communicative interaction (even though sceptics might claim that the format usually results in alternating monologues rather than any real dialogue). Readers also interacted with Egan's work either during or after the original transmission of the work by using Twitter's pre-defined options for retweeting, responding and liking, but the tight publication schedule did not allow Egan to change the course of the story in response to the reactions of her readers. If we understand interactive fiction as a literary form that requires the active

participation of readers in the construction of the text, then ‘Black Box’ hardly qualifies. With its rapid-fire transmission it employs the brevity and pointedness of Twitter to full effect, but the breathless delivery simultaneously curtails the constructive interactions between authors and readers that have affected such slowly serialized works as Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. Twitter is an interactive medium, but it is also a fast medium, and in Egan’s case the skillful use of rapidity works against the interactivity.

Bombadil in the digital age

My second example of an established writer who has tackled the Twitter format is David Mitchell, British author of the acclaimed novel *Cloud Atlas* (2004). Mitchell’s first experiment with the medium was the story ‘The Right Sort’ which was tweeted from his own Twitter profile (@david_mitchell) from 14-20 July 2014. Mitchell made no secret of the fact that he had been asked by his publisher Sceptre Books to compose a Twitter story as part of the promotion of the novel *The Bone Clocks* (published 18 July 2014). ‘The Right Sort’ is thus both a self-contained digital story and an advertisement for a novel, and it therefore occupies a diffuse position between text and paratext. As McCracken says about similar publisher-solicited texts: ‘These short narratives serve as primary digital texts while readers consume them but effectively as part of the publishers’ paratext for a given author’s work’ (McCracken, 2013: 111). In this double function, ‘The Right Sort’ shares certain traits with Egan’s ‘Black Box’ which could be enjoyed on its own but also led our attention to the novel from which it drew its main character. However, ‘Black Box’ was published two years after *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, so if we consider it a paratext it is certainly what Genette terms a ‘delayed paratext’ (6).

‘The Right Sort’ tells an eerie story about the Valium-popping boy Nathan and his mother who visit a strange and possibly haunted house. With its suspenseful plot and atmospheric

descriptions it is a fine little short story, but as Twitter fiction it is less interesting. While Egan's Twitter story is clearly composed with the format in mind, 'The Right Sort' is more aptly described as a traditional short story that happens to be cut up in little pieces and delivered in tweets. The story exhibits none of Egan's careful balancing between poetic fragmentation and narrative flow, and most of the tweets can hardly stand on their own. Many tweets are even cut off in mid-sentence and continued in the next tweet, e.g.: 'The next picture's by the same artist. This one's an older man, with a moustache. Heavysset. He needs an eyebrow shave. He's –' followed by '– shaking his head, I thought for a moment, but it's just the dregs of the Valium in my blood. Look. Quite still' (Mitchell, 2014: n.p.). The story was delivered in two chunks of tweets per day, but even though the narrative contains plenty of cliff-hangers, the narrative rhythm was not coordinated with the publishing schedule. The only small nod towards the Twitter format is a tweet where the narrator reflects on the effects of the Valium he has just ingested: 'The Pill's just kicking in now. Valium breaks down the world into bite-sized sentences. Like this one. All lined up. Munch-munch' (ibid.).

If Twitter fiction is merely fiction distributed via Twitter, then the 'The Right Sort' surely belongs to the category, but if Twitter fiction is also fiction specifically composed for the medium, then the story hardly qualifies. One of the most interesting things that can be said of the story is that it eventually grew into a novel, *Slade House*, which was published 27 October 2015. The first chapter of this novel is an expanded and revised version of 'The Right Sort', so we are dealing with a Twitter story (or at the very least a tweeted story) that was written to promote a novel and which in turn grew into a new novel. As a further step in these complex feedback loops between different stories and media, David Mitchell published another Twitter story to promote *Slade House*, and the close and innovative integration of content, form and medium in this new story bears witness to a very steep learning curve on Mitchell's part.

The 513 micro-instalments of the story were tweeted from 7 September to 31 October 2015 – a much longer time span than Egan’s story. The title of the story – ‘@I_Bombadil’ – hints that Twitter is woven tightly into the fabric of the narrative, and the story itself confirms this impression. Both ‘@I_Bombadil’ and *Slade House* are centred on the spooky house visited by Nathan and his mother in ‘The Right Sort’. The last Saturday of October every ninth year, people mysteriously vanish from the vicinity of Slade House, and the five chapters of the novel tell the story of the disappearances in 1979, 1988, 1997, 2006 and 2015, respectively. ‘@I_Bombadil’ narrates a series of events in the two months leading up to the final chapter, and it is thus closely integrated with the plot of the novel. The story is narrated by a creepy cyberstalker who calls himself Bombadil (after a character from Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*), and it is tweeted from his rather than David Mitchell’s own profile. Bombadil has discovered the recurring disappearances and tweets about his attempts to solve the mystery. Accordingly, the enunciative situation of the story is congruent with its mode of delivery. In addition to tweeting about his sleuthing, Bombadil persistently woos a colleague of his, Lottie, also via Twitter. As part of his inept philandering, he brags about his hacking skills, hinting about access to the darkweb and claiming personal knowledge of Edward Snowden. In line with his self-proclaimed expertise in digital and social media, Bombadil’s missives are full of the contractions and abbreviations often found in tweets and text messages, e.g. ‘thank u all4yr messages earlier2day’ or ‘4FSAKE LOTTIE’ (Mitchell, 2015a: n.p.). Furthermore, his tweets are rife with caps, emojis, photos, links to YouTube videos, hashtags etc. – in other words, his tweets resemble the many other tweets in our daily Twitter feed. Rather than merely a tweeted story, ‘@I_Bombadil’ is thus a story consisting of tweets, and as we access this story on our smartphone or tablet, we can follow the many links and enlarge the digital photos at will. While ‘The Right Sort’ and ‘Black Box’ can be adapted to the book medium without any significant loss, the multimodal narration of ‘@I_Bombadil’ is heavily dependent on the smartphone or tablet medium through which it is delivered, and in its

integration of different modal affordances it belongs to what Hayles has called the second generation of digital fiction (Hayles 2008).⁸

The temporality and rhythm of the delivery also create an impression of events unfolding in real time. The story was distributed and set in the same time period (early September to late October 2015), and the publication schedule was anything but regular. When Bombadil sets out early in the morning, the tweets are delivered at daybreak, and the frequency of tweets varies according to the activities of the narrator. Some days he is busy and hardly tweets, and at other times – like when he is bored during a train ride – a number of tweets follow in close succession. The real-time aspect is underscored by references to current events (the fugitive crisis in Europe, UKIP, binge-watching *Sense8* on Netflix), some of which are so current that the references could not have been planned out in advance. These topical references and the varying rhythm of delivery are used effectively by Mitchell to create an immersive real-time serialization that 19th century feuilletons could hardly hope to achieve. Readers get the sense that the story unfolds as it is told, and the concurrent narration discussed by Thomas as a medium-specific aspect of Twitter is thus a defining feature of ‘@_Bombadil’.

Bombadil’s narrative is scaffolded by a number of tweets from both David Mitchell’s own and Sceptre Books’ Twitter profiles. Since Bombadil is a fictional character, he did not have any followers until his story began, and Mitchell’s followers had to be instructed where to look. On the day the story was launched, Mitchell sent out a number of tweets to this effect, e.g.: ‘I’ve been told that a person/persons unknown is/are tweeting as a character from my upcoming novel SLADE HOUSE @_Bombadil...’ followed by ‘...the public is urged NOT to approach @_Bombadil as he’s an unhinged fantasist. If you see him, alert the metafictional authorities ASAP’. With Birke and Christ’s useful terms, such tweets simultaneously function as *navigational* and *commercial* paratexts (68) that guide readers in the right direction (in this case both towards the Twitter story and the

upcoming novel) in order to promote a new product. David Mitchell's tweets during Bombadil's story were not only navigational and commercial, however. At various points in '@I_Bombadil' Mitchell is disparagingly mentioned by the narrator, just as Mitchell comments on Bombadil's experiences from his own profile. This sophisticated role-playing (which has literary precedents in novels by Flann O'Brien, Paul Auster and others) was later picked up on by readers of Bombadil's story, who in their comments on both Mitchell's and Bombadil's tweets began playing the author and his character out against each other.

Unlike Egan's story, '@I_Bombadil' thus causes a sustained interaction between the author, the readers and the unfolding text. As the preceding analysis shows, the mere publication of a story on social media does not automatically result in such an interaction. Both the author and his readers actively have to seek it out, and the temporality of delivery needs to support it. With its 513 tweets, '@I_Bombadil' is slightly shorter than 'Black Box', but it was distributed over almost two months rather than during ten evenings. This time span is comparable to e.g. the original serialization of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in *Blackwood's Magazine* (from February to April 1899), and it allowed readers to reflect and react on what they read, not only by retweeting or liking, but also increasingly by answering both Bombadil and Mitchell. The time span also allowed Mitchell (and especially Mitchell as Bombadil) to reply to the responses – and these replies became part of Bombadil's Twitter stream, and thus part of his story. The overall plot of the story, including its surprising cliff-hanger conclusion which leads directly into the fifth chapter of *Slade House* (and thus enforces our desire to buy the novel), was of course planned in advance, but Bombadil's interaction with his readers (who numbered almost 1000 towards the end of the story) nevertheless created small whirlpools in the overall narrative.

In the first few weeks, the level of reader participation was relatively low. Many of Bombadil's tweets did not receive any kind of response, and others were retweeted or liked only once

or twice. A few readers, e.g. ‘Firthy’ and ‘Stephen Elsdén’, replied frequently to Bombadil’s tweets right from the beginning, and after a couple of weeks other readers followed suit, but their answers were not acknowledged until the middle of October, when both Bombadil and Mitchell himself joined the fray and responded directly to some of the replies. A typical exchange was initiated on 2 October when ‘Firthy’ replied to one of Bombadil’s tweets with the question ‘Who are you?’. Mitchell responded on 15 October: ‘Heaven knows, Firthy, if I had £1 for every time I’ve asked myself that question, I’d have £13,204 by now’, and on 21 October Bombadil joined the three-way conversation between author, character and reader in his usual aggressive style: ‘David Mitchell wld u PLEASE sod off out of my twitter feed & stop answering Qs put2ME? U have been warned’. Not all would-be interlocutors were rewarded with replies, but on e.g. 21 and 22 October, Bombadil nevertheless responded to 23 different readers (some of them more than once). This inclusive approach motivated more readers to participate, and the last ten days of the transmission were characterized by a growing number of elaborate interactions. Bombadil’s quest for a warm sweater was aided by useful links supplied by helpful readers,⁹ and his avowed dislike for David Mitchell was supported by readers willing to play along. At several points in the story, Bombadil also asks his followers for advice, e.g. in a tweet from 30 October where he needs help in identifying a mystery leaf (shown in a photo) that he has found in Slade House, and this tweet triggered replies from more than twenty different readers. As the narrative unfolded, the level of interaction thus increased, and the reading of the story became a social event – or, with Jerome McGann, a *textual event* (McGann, 1991) – where readers and the author collaborated in the telling of Bombadil’s ill-fated adventure.

As a result of both the participatory effort that gradually arose around ‘@I_Bombadil’ and of the story’s function as a supplement to a novel, Mitchell’s Twitter story has much in common with what Henry Jenkins has labeled *transmedia storytelling*:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story. (Jenkins, 2007: n.p.)

According to Jenkins, this dispersal of a fiction across several media creates ‘different points of entry for different audience segments’ and invites the active engagement of consumers who have to work in concert to piece the various elements together. It is therefore ‘the ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence’ (ibid.). Transmedia storytelling is usually connected with huge franchises like *Harry Potter* and *The Matrix*, and ‘@I_Bombadil’ and *Slade House* certainly lack the complex world-building and financial scale of such vast enterprises. I would nevertheless argue that a description of this small nexus of stories as a down-scaled example of transmedia storytelling allows us to understand its movements across platforms and its participatory nature. And just as importantly, it allows us to discuss the monetary impetus behind ‘@I_Bombadil’. On the one hand, the story provides a free aesthetic experience that can be enjoyed on its own. On the other hand, by actively engaging readers in a common textual endeavour it generates a sense of co-ownership and loyalty that increases the likelihood that we will buy the novel and tell others about it, a process that drives most transmedia storytelling. As a fitting conclusion to Bombadil’s serialized story, a number of his followers did indeed purchase *Slade House* and shared this information with other readers. Responding to Bombadil’s final tweet from 31 October, ‘Sahra Vass’ wrote: ‘Scared for u now: book delivered@ 2pm2day... Is THAT where your story continues now?’, and the ever-reliable ‘Stephen Elsdon’ even posted a photo of the novel, subtly stating that ‘I have your adventure & life in my hands’. Murray and Squires argue that digital publishing models often cause readers to become co-promoters or prosumers (17). The readers who participated in Mitchell’s unfolding social and textual experiment became both.

With its real-time distribution over a couple of months, its use of multimedial forms of expression such as photographs and hyperlinks, its wickedly precise deployment of the language of social media and its inclusion of readers in the construction of the story, '@I_Bombadil' is one of the most successful Twitter stories so far. Mitchell's spooky Halloween story may not be as lyrically and thematically rich as Egan's 'Black Box', and it may ultimately want to make us buy a novel and contribute to the continuing survival of legacy publishing, but its willingness to experiment with the multimodal affordances, the elastic temporality and the rich possibilities for interaction offered by Twitter nevertheless conquers new ground for the emerging literary format.

To be continued...

The printed feuilletons of the Gutenberg Galaxy may be a thing of the past, but serialized fiction is thriving in various digital media, and in this article I have discussed examples of Twitter serialization by two established authors. Like Thomas's analyses in '140 Characters in Search of a Story' my own readings have shown that Twitter fiction is still very much an emerging form, and that different writers continue to use the affordances of the medium to different ends. Jennifer Egan combines 'the odd poetry that can happen in a hundred and forty characters' with a sustained narrative that asks readers to approach the medium in a different way than they are used to; and after cutting an ordinary short story into little pieces and feeding it to readers one bite at a time, David Mitchell has subsequently published a story that incorporates the real-time rhythm and the interactive and multimodal possibilities of the medium. It is often argued that Twitterature forms a whole new genre, but the stories analysed above have little in common besides their mode of delivery, and to consider Twitter fiction a genre of its own would therefore be just as imprecise as describing fiction published in book form as a separate genre.

One element the analysed stories do have in common is their serial aspect, and in an attempt to address this crucial feature of Twitter fiction, my analyses have paid particular attention to *temporality* and *interaction*. These two interrelated aspects have always been constitutive factors of serialization, and my analyses of their function in two different stories have allowed me to relate Twitter fiction to earlier forms of serialized literature and to argue that the perceived rupture between print and digital fiction (expressed by e.g. Hayles and Rettberg) is offset by a significant degree of continuity. One of the important differences between Victorian serials and Twitterature is the speed with which the latter can potentially be delivered to its readers. This rapidity allows for stories that consist of what Thomas calls an immersive series of ‘NOW moments’, but it also has consequences for how readers participate in the textual events. The cognitive labour of creative interaction takes time, even in a digital environment, and the rapid transmissions of much Twitter fiction sometimes work against the collaborative effort that fiction on social media would otherwise seem to call for. The sustained interaction around ‘@I_Bombadil’ was made possible because its publication schedule unfolded over a time span that was comparable to many printed feuilletons, and the slow serialization of Mitchell’s story thus provides an example of how remnants of print publication can still be relevant in digital culture.

Another important similarity between print and Twitter serialization is the monetary impetus behind both. As the burgeoning field of periodical studies has widely discussed, Victorian serials usually had the important secondary or even primary aim of selling the newspapers or magazines in which they were printed (Turner, 2014). To discuss how serialized Twitter fiction often has similar ulterior motives, I have analysed stories by established authors with a career in legacy publishing and discussed how they are used to promote a concrete printed product. Both Squires (2009) and Thompson (2012) remind us that it is notoriously difficult to measure the sales effect of the marketing of literature, and the current article certainly does not purport to gauge how successful Twitterature

is as a marketing strategy. It merely wishes to stress that financial considerations should not be disregarded when considering Twitter fiction by authors with ties to legacy publishing. Such authors may be paid a fee by their publisher to compose a story for the medium, but the publishers would naturally like a return on their investment, and since there are no direct ways to monetize Twitter fiction, the stories have to serve a secondary function as promotion of saleable goods in other media. As Michael Rudin rightly points out: ‘Free is not a sustainable business model for any product’ (Rudin, 2011: n.p.). However, as legacy publishing has demonstrated again and again, financial motives and artistic quality are not mutually exclusive. Of the two stories analysed in this article, the promotional aspect is most evident in ‘@I_Bombadil’, where both the content and the timing of the story are clearly intended to peddle *Slade House*, and where the serialized and participatory nature of the narration seem designed to generate a sense of co-ownership that will lead to an eventual purchase of the novel. Promotional intentions notwithstanding, ‘@I_Bombadil’ provides a rich literary experience that combines the multimodal and collaborative affordances of digital storytelling with the familiar pleasures of the printed novel. Perhaps an important future function of Twitterature is as an innovative form of marketing which like most transmedia storytelling wants our money but also gives us something in return.¹⁰

Twitter fiction is currently situated in some undefined zone between marketing, individual work, transmedia storytelling, interaction with readers, text, paratext, poetry and narrative. New digital media and emerging formats create new literary forms, and these forms will remain in flux just as the media themselves keep transforming: In September 2015, just around the time ‘@I_Bombadil’ was serialized, Twitter announced plans to abolish the 140-character limit, and such a move would naturally push the already errant march of Twitterature in new, unforeseeable directions. Only one thing is certain: the ongoing story of Twitter fiction’s creative reinvention of serialized literature for a digital age is far from over.

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Notes

¹ For recent discussions of the impact of digitization on the literary field, see Phillips, 2007; Thompson, 2012; Murray and Squires, 2013; Hjarvard and Helles, 2015.

² Among the many authors who use Twitter in this fashion are William Gibson, Salman Rushdie, J. K. Rowling and Margaret Atwood. See Kirschenbaum, 2015 for a rich discussion of some of the consequences of authors' presence on Twitter and other social media.

³ In her review of the story, Lisa Gee specifically invokes the poetic nature of 'Black Box', describing it as 'an evocative and aphoristic prose poem' (Gee, 2012: n.p.).

⁴ More specifically, the story was composed 'by hand in a Japanese notebook that had eight rectangles on each page' (Egan, 2012a: n.p.), and this of course challenges the notion of Egan's Twitter story as digitally born.

⁵ Thomas argues that ‘each reader of a Twitterfiction has a unique experience shaped by his or her own choices about who or what to follow, making it impossible to predict how this surrounding content influences the interpretation of individual tweets’ (Thomas, 2014: 96).

⁶ In the same article, Hayles describes modern readers’ impatience with ‘noninteractive’ objects like the Victorian novel (188), but as already argued, the temporal gap between each instalment of serialized Victorian novels allowed readers to respond to the ongoing story, and these responses sometimes affected the outcome of the plot. The notion of print culture as static and digital culture as dynamic and interactive is prevalent but somewhat misguided (see also Duguid, 2007 for a critique of this biased distinction between print and digitality).

⁷ The communications circuit was originally presented in Darnton’s article ‘What is the history of books’ from 1982, and it aims to describe the many stages that a work of literature passes through between its composition and consumption (Darnton, 1990: 112).

⁸ Expanding on Hayles, Hans Kristian Rustad has proposed the emergence of a fourth generation of digital fiction, which is written for and consumed in social media (Rustad, 2012), and Twitter fiction would obviously belong in this generation as well.

⁹ The comical specificity of the readers’ helpful suggestions (such as a link to a Lambswool Tartan Serape Cape from The Scottish Trading Company) reinforces the illusion that Bombadil is not just a disembodied narrator but a real person with quotidian bodily needs.

¹⁰ For more elaborate discussions of the complex financial logic of both digital publishing and transmedia storytelling see Jenkins, 2006; Squires, 2009; Thompson, 2012; Hjarvard and Helles, 2015; Mygind, 2015; Tanderup, 2016.

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