Impact Report for The Future of Reading? An Exhibition of Digital Literature

Dr Alice Bell and Professor Astrid Ensslin, December 2014

1. Introduction

This report provides information about the impact of 'The Future of Reading? An Exhibition of Digital Literature'. The exhibition ran from 22 October to 14 November 2014 at Bank Street Arts, Sheffield, UK and is also complemented with an online version/archive of the exhibition held on the project website (details below). The exhibition was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of the Reading Digital Fiction research project and sponsored by the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO). Please see www.readingdigitalfiction.com for further details.

2. Aims

The Future of Reading? aimed to:

- introduce the public to a range of different types of born digital literature;
- trace the historical development and technological and literary heritage of digital literature;
- disseminate digital fiction research;
- provide a space for visitors to read digital literature;
- provide resources for visitors to read digital literature beyond the exhibition;
- promote electronic literature.

The exhibition comprised three galleries with the structure based on three areas of digital fiction research. Gallery 1 focused on the historical context of digital literature; Gallery 2 focused on different forms of interactivity; Gallery 3 focused on multimodality. Each station had descriptive texts about each of the works in the exhibition written by Dr Alice Bell and Prof Astrid Ensslin. Links to the online version of the exhibition were included in the exhibition catalogue from which virtual visitors can experience the works outside of the gallery on their own devices. Bell and Ensslin also wrote a "Curatorial Statement" which outlined the aims and context to the exhibition.

The three galleries were dressed to complement the themes of the rooms. Photographs of the exhibition can be found here: http://readingdigitalfiction.com/the-future-of-reading-online-exhibition/exhibition-images/

The online exhibition complements and archives the physical exhibition: http://readingdigitalfiction.com/the-future-of-reading-online-exhibition/ Like the physical exhibition, the online exhibition comprises the Curatorial Statement and Acknowledgements, three galleries which mirror the three galleries in the physical exhibition, a map of the physical exhibition, and a timeline titled "A Brief History of the Internet". The online galleries have descriptive texts about each of the works in the exhibition, and there are links to all of the digital works so that virtual visitors can experience them on their own devices.

3. Press and Promotions

The exhibition was advertised via

- The Bank Street Arts website: http://bankstreetarts.com/exhibitions/the-future-of-reading-an-exhibition-of-digital-literature/
- 12,000 flyers distributed throughout Sheffield.
- The Off the Shelf literary festival programme in Sheffield: http://www.welcometosheffield.co.uk/visit/off-the-shelf
- The Yorkshire Times: http://www.yorkshiretimes.co.uk/article/The-Future-Of-Reading No readership figures available.
- The Sheffield Star: http://www.thestar.co.uk/what-s-on/out-about/latest-in-digital-arts-at-sheffield-gallery-1-6901995 Sheffield Star (printed) has a total readership of 113,000. No figures are available for the website.
- The Sheffield Telegraph: http://www.sheffieldtelegraph.co.uk/what-s-on/latest-in-digital-arts-at-sheffield-gallery-1-6901995 The Sheffield Telegraph (printed) is listed as total readership of 51,000. No figures are available for the website.
- Our Favourite Places: http://www.ourfaveplaces.co.uk/events/happenings/reading-digital-fiction The website receives an average of 20,000 page views per month. The newsletter in which the feature was advertised was distributed to approximately 600 people.

4. The Venue, Attendance and Participation

Bank Street Arts (http://bankstreetarts.com/) is a cross-disciplinary Arts Centre in Sheffield, England. It is self-funded and has five exhibition spaces, an education room, and several artist workshops. Many of its exhibitions explore the intersection between fine art and creative writing. It is open between 11-4, four days per week. Average attendance for an exhibition is between 10 and 20 people per day and thus 40-80 per week.

- General admission to the exhibition = 340
    - Week 1: 200
    - Week 2: 50
    - Week 3: 90
- Attendees at the launch event 23 October 2014 = 85 (cf. average attendance of 40 at launch events in general).
- Attendees at curator-led tour of the exhibition = 18

- Attendees at pop-up book club = 3
- Attendees at student sessions (from the 'Digital Fiction' and 'Experimental Writing' modules at Sheffield Hallam University) = 34

TOTAL = 480

- Visits to the online exhibition and archive 'The Future of Reading? An Exhibition of Digital Literature' from 22 October to 4th December 2014 = 294[1].

5. Impact

Impact, from our perspective, corresponds to the AHRC's definition of impact as "the 'influence' of research or its 'effect on' an individual, a community, the development of policy, or the creation of a new product or service. It relates to the effects of research on our economic, social and cultural lives"[2]. We measured the impact of the physical and online exhibition via a feedback form. Attendees were asked to rate how much they knew about digital fiction before and after seeing the exhibition. In terms of impact, the form asked the following questions:

- How much did you know about digital fiction before and after visiting the exhibition?
- Have you learned anything new from the exhibition today? (If so, what?)
- Do you feel more confident using digital media after experiencing the exhibition? (If so, what?)
- How has your experience of the exhibition influenced your understanding of reading and literature in the twenty-first century?
- Do you have any further comments about the exhibition or about digital fiction?

Demographic data including postcode and occupation were also collected but have not been included in this particular report.

Summary of Results

66 people completed a feedback form at Bank Street Arts[3].

- **How much did you know about digital fiction before and after visiting the exhibition?**
  84% of respondents said that their knowledge of digital fiction had increased after seeing the exhibition; 11% reported no change; 5% did not answer the question.

- **Have you learned anything new from the exhibition today? (If so, what?)**
  Comments included:
  - I came in unaware of its existence and now I'm genuinely interested.
  - It has completely opened my eyes to a whole new world of literature.
  - The variety and breadth of fiction on offer. I want to download some!

- **Do you feel more confident using digital media after experiencing the exhibition? (If so, what?)**

34 people (51% of respondents) answered the question; 32 people (49%) did not answer the question.

Of those that answered, 30 respondents (88%) said 'yes'; 3 respondents (9%) said 'no'; 1 respondent (3%) said 'I don't know'.

Comments included:
- Yes, using different interfaces to read literature!
- It wasn't as complicated as I thought it would be.
- Yes definitely. I feel I can express my voice.
- Feeling willing to engage with it more as I have a basic understanding.
- I got to experience technology from the past which is cool.

- **How has your experience of the exhibition influenced your understanding of reading and literature in the twenty-first century**?
  45 people (68% of respondents) answered the question; 21 people (32%) did not answer the question.

  Of those that answered, 35 respondents (78%) indicated 'yes'; 10 respondents (12%) indicated 'no'.

  Comments included:
  - I've learned about lots of exciting variations.
  - I was sceptical at first that a book could be bettered but I now see the potential.
  - Made me realise the versatility of storytelling, something I'd never considered before.
  - The roots of this fiction are really interesting.
  - It has opened my eyes
  - It has certainly broadened my knowledge of what is available.

- **Do you have any further comments about the exhibition or about digital fiction?**
  - I am so happy to see a focus on this work. Exactly the sort if real/placed approach to research that is needed.
  - Very interesting. Would recommend.
  - Very interesting and fun.
  - Love the exhibition but find the digital works misplaced in a gallery setting.
  - Amazing, lovely, educational
  - Liked the historical/methodological/academic approach
  - V interesting - more talks/exhibitions please!

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[1] Website visitors were from (in descending order): United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Brazil, Norway, Spain, Germany, Ireland, France, Australia, Portugal, Italy, Netherlands, Argentina, Ukraine, Switzerland, Greece, Poland, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Belgium, Philippines, Mexico, Chile, New Zealand, India, Austria, Thailand, Denmark, Japan, Peru, Finland, Romania, Ecuador, China, Malaysia, Russian Federation, Nigeria, Slovenia, Uruguay, Venezuela, Nepal, Colombia, Trinidad and Tobago, Vietnam, United Arab Emirates, Honduras, Algeria, Luxembourg, Paraguay, Republic of Korea, Sweden, Malta, Panama, Albania, Pakistan,

Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Czech Republic, Ghana, Mauritius, Tunisia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Puerto Rico, Bahamas, Serbia, Oman.

[2] http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funding-Opportunities/Documents/ImpactFAQ.pdf

[3] We have only 1 response for the online exhibition so far; this has not been included in the analysis.