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Introduction: Digital Realism

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a heavy reliance on digital technologies: workplaces and classrooms have retreated to Zoom meetings; online video game narratives and streaming services have become a staple of contemporary entertainment; and social media pervades our life and seeks to distract us at every turn. Existence is now infused with non-human computer language. Even contemporary print texts display what N.K. Hayles calls the "mark of the digital" (2008, p. 159). Hayles (2008) argues that contemporary literature is deeply interpenetrated by electronic textuality:

> digital technologies do more than mark the surfaces of contemporary print novels. They also put into play dynamics that interrogate and reconfigure the relations between authors and readers, humans and intelligent machines, code and language… More than a mode of material production (although it is that), digitality has become the textual condition of the twenty-first-century literature. (p. 186)

The primary goal of this issue was to offer critical and creative works that sought to define this new digital realism. Jed Esty (2016) argues that debates over literary realism, or "realism wars", have been ongoing since the late Victorian era:

> Realism is always a diffuse and moving target, as difficult to define as it is properly to apply. Even taken in highly specific conditions – stipulated to this or that artefact, artist, medium, epoch, movement, or national tradition – realism perennially eludes strong and stable conceptualization. (p. 316)

Postmodern scholar Frederic Jameson (1989) reluctantly uses the term "realism" to acknowledge:

> The emergence of the secular referent from the Enlightenment purging of the sacred codes, at the same time that it accuses some first setting in place of the economic system itself, before both language and the market go on to know declensions of the second degree in the modern and imperialism. (p. 65)

In this "new space", Jameson argues that the "distorted and unreflexive attempts of newer cultural production must … in their own fashion, be considered as so many approaches to the representation of (a new) reality…" (1989, p. 49). These new realisms, Jameson continues, can simultaneously be read as "new forms of realism (or at least of the mimesis of reality)" (1989, p. 49), while at the same time be regarded as distractions from reality.

What, then, is realism in a digitally-saturated world? How are writers harnessing, impacted by, or restricted by such digital realism? What are the new frontiers for digital literary realism? How does digitality interrogate/extend traditional forms? To answer these questions, this special issue of *TEXT* invited academics and creative practitioners to consider the following:

- digital realism and agency
- the role of digital realism in contemporary creative writing
- social and political potentials of digital realism/literature
- digital and embodied materialities
- digital realism/literature as archive/lineage/genealogy
- digital realism and simulacra
- digital realism and virtual reality
- critical code studies
- digital dissemination gaming narratives
- digital realism and social media
- digital realism and A.I.
- print works that display the "mark of the digital" (Hayles, 2008, p. 159)
- generative/remixed/hybrid works
- code poetry
- teaching writing in digital space
- digital realism and writerly identity
- digital poetics
- modernist/postmodernist digital realism
- realism versus the digital

Beck Wise, Simone Lyons and Siall Waterbright's article, "'I wrote to become part of that discourse community': Developing writerly identity and agency in an online writing course", explores the notion that contemporary writing is now always in a digital environment. A case study of a hybrid researched writing class is used to demonstrate how online-first Writing About Writing pedagogy has helped creative writing students through a digital, sustainable, realistic culture of writing.

In "*Rubik*, the Short Story Cycle, and the Digital Age", Emma Darragh uses Elizabeth Tan's *Rubik* (2017) to explore the short story cycle as a literary form that is capable of representing contemporary digital reality.

"'A story with many rooms': Twine as a tool to expand life writing practice about place and space" by Mia-Francesca Jones explores the capabilities of the Twine platform to expand and augment creative nonfiction life writing. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard and Edward Casey's place theory, this paper explores the living and moving through the multi-directional and multi-temporal nature of place by interrogating a personal Twine essay on homesickness.

Shannon Sandford's "'Loading Memories…': Deteriorating Pasts and Distant Futures in Sutu's *These Memories Won't Last*" explores Australian artist and graphic designer Stuart Campbell or Sutu's *These Memories Won't Last*, a webcomic that employs sound, animation, and other interactive elements to render the lived experience of a World War II veteran and migrant suffering from late-stage dementia. Through this case study, Sandford explores how contemporary webcomics are uniquely positioned to explore subjects that sit on the outer edges of representation. Sandford's reading explores how comics' generic features and digital affordances bring new modes of expression to life-writing; with a focus on perceptions of time and memory.

This issue contains a number of creative works that utilise digital tools to define a new digital realism. Some of these works use digital tools to produce print (or printable) works, while others are born-digital, interactive, and unprintable. The latter are not hosted on the *TEXT* website. Rather, we have provided links to these works, accompanied by artist statements. As such, we cannot guarantee that these works will always be accessible. As digital archive scholars Stuart Moulthrop and Dene Grigar (2017) posit, 'obsolescence is both culturally dispositive and inevitable' (p. 3).

Will Luers, Hazel Smith, and Roger Dean have reprised their collaboration to produce 'Dolphins in the Reservoir', an interactive and recombinant work that confronts the climate, disease, authoritarianism, and technological changes that define our contemporary digital realism. Bringing together image, music and text, Luers, Smith and Dean chart the contours of contemporary life, while leaving the political boundaries – the colours of the map – in the reader's hands.

'How to Knit a Human – the Interactive Version' by Anna Jacobson uses lived experience and the Twine platform to explore a patient's journey through the psychiatric hospital system.

Rory Green's 'SYSTEM_ERROR' is an interactive generative poem that explores the fracture of the digital self via dialogue boxes reminiscent of operating system pop-ups.

'Red Sonnet, Country Song' by Steph Amir is a poetic hybrid between two forms: computer-generated poetry and found poetry. The source texts were selected by Googling "most famous

poems" and "most iconic poems" to create a list of the ten poems that appeared most frequently, excluding those by poets already on the list. Online software was then used to randomise the words within these poems. It was then manually edited by Amir into a Shakespearean sonnet form.

Jenny Hedley's 'I <3 my Mother Bots: Archive, corporeality and écriture matière' is a creative and eisegetical work that uses speculative, experimental, and constrained creativity to give birth to two Twitter bots whose voices emerge from the author's late mother's literary archive.

'Keyboard performances' by Pascalle Burton is a conceptual poetic work that traces the invisibilia of a text as it is typed. The result is a visual materiality of the poetic creative process.

Finally, Jeremy Hight's poem 'A woman is making a cloud' was produced through a hybrid process that uses artificial intelligence (AI) generated lexias and human-AI-like-performance to analyse datasets or images to generate the poetic work. Hight, regrettably, passed away this year. He was an artist/theorist/informationdesigner/writer/photographer/musician/editor /curator who hated the need for so many hyphens. Specifically, he was a leader in defining the field of locative narrative. This work was one of the last he produced, and we are extremely proud to be able to include it here.

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David Thomas Henry Wright is an author, poet, digital artist, and academic. He won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards' Digital Literature Prize, 2019 Robert Coover Award (2nd prize), and 2021 Carmel Bird Literary Award. He has been shortlisted for multiple other prizes, published in various journals, and received various research grants and fellowships. He has a PhD from Murdoch University and a Masters from the University of Edinburgh, and taught Creative Writing at China's top university, Tsinghua. He is co-editor of The Digital Review*, narrative consultant for Stanford's Smart Primer project, and Associate Professor at Nagoya University.*

Shastra Deo was born in Fiji, raised in Melbourne, and lives in Brisbane, Australia. Her first book, The Agonist *(UQP 2017), won the 2016 Arts Queensland Thomas Shapcott Poetry Prize and the 2018 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. Her second book,* The Exclusion Zone*, is forthcoming from University of Queensland Press on 31 January 2023. Shastra holds a Bachelor of Creative Arts in Writing and English Literature, First Class Honours and a University Medal in Creative Writing, a Master of Arts in Writing, Editing and Publishing, and a Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing from the University of Queensland.*

Chris Arnold writes software and poetry from Whadjuk Noongar country in Perth, Western Australia. With David Thomas Henry Wright, Chris won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards' Digital Literature Prize, and placed 2nd in the 2019 Robert Coover Award. He was shortlisted for Australian Book Review*'s 2022 Peter Porter Poetry Prize, and is completing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Western Australia.*