

# The Page is a Touchscreen: Haptic Narratives and “Novel” Media

Chloe Anna Milligan  
*University of Florida*

“The page remains a screen.” Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*

## 1. Introduction

The way we read is changing with the way we touch. From print and analogue to digital interfaces, readers across formats are more than ever taking account of their embodied role as a consequence of material and literary shifts in the medial landscape. As the computer has served as a remediator of all other media, users have long conceived of computing content as primarily ocular (visual, graphic, and textual) media. But the desktop or laptop computer are no longer the only, or even the primary, devices for (re)mediated media-consumption; their principally ocular interfaces (though filtered through the physicality of the keyboard and mouse) barely glance the surface of the newer ways we can make meaning for newer media. The iPad, iPhone, Android devices, etc., and their touchscreens now, more than the computer monitor ever has, offer haptic and proprioceptive interaction as a primary—and distinct—way by which to create and experience digital narratives. Their interfaces blur physical touch and mediated gesture, and allow a nuanced and poignant complication of what we mean by “digital” reading. “Digits” may refer to numbers—the data signals 0 and 1, which form the basis of binary computational operations. But the other meaning of the word “digital” concerns “of or relating to... fingers,” our digits (“digital, n. and adj.”). In the multiply-mediated environment of our devices, these two meanings of the term coalesce in our uses of ocular and haptic interfaces, and this coalescence of the terms reflects also a change in what the “novel” means on the small screen. In this article, I apply a haptic media studies approach to a representative sample of small screen fictions for iPad that invite readers to take stock of these fictions as *touchable* texts, just as much as they are *readable* texts. I then discuss how these haptic narratives are best described not only as novels, but also as “novel” media. On the small screen, what the novel can mean has been configured

in terms beyond just alphabetic narrative. Our own sense of touch interacting with the haptic interface of the screen reflects that the way we now experience narrative is changing. And novel media are changing with us: we can feel it.

## 2. *Make It Novel*

Before any digital literary innovation, it was within the print literary tradition that Ezra Pound declared the prototype for this change: to “MAKE IT NEW.” As Jessica Pressman explains in *Digital Modernism*, “Making it new means razing the underbrush of the recent past in order to seek out the older, taller trees that can serve as a foundation for new poetic structures” (1). But Pound’s modernist slogan has been abused to signify something entirely else: modernize has come to mean, update without looking back. We should, however, see through those trees Pressman analogizes and realize instead that Pound’s demand to make it new more accurately means to bring back the old. Rather than update at breakneck speed to the next new thing, meaningful aesthetic innovation is to see what had/has staying power in a medially different environment. Pressman sees Pound’s poetic aphorism to “make it new” as an antidote to our contemporary society’s shorter-attention-span version of the new, “defined by engagement with new media and obsessed with newness” (1). She argues then that “making it new [is] an act of recovery and renovation, not an assertion of novelty” (4). Rather than new media, therefore, we should investigate and invest in the literary equivalent of *novel* media. For in the modernist moment to which Pound was writing, in which he was urging a remaking, the literary novel was a medium undergoing its own renovation and recovery. Or it was being razed and resurrected as something else entirely. “Novelty” in this sense brings about a new kind of novel. In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt famously explains that, “The novel is thus the logical literary vehicle of a culture which...has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel; and it is therefore well named” (13). “Novel,” as that literary vehicle, indeed gets its name from “the Italian word *novella* (from the plural of Latin *novellus*, a late variant of *novus*, meaning ‘new’)” (Burgess). Watt describes what authors like Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding did in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to popularize this new genre

of literature as distinct from the epic, the drama, the poem, etc. But in 1922, T.S. Eliot challenged Watt's generic notion by proposing that a single author and his work may have outdone or undone the form entirely: James Joyce, in *Ulysses*. According to Eliot, Joyce's novel defies classification because classification no longer matters:

I am not begging the question in calling *Ulysses* a "novel"; and if you call it an epic it will not matter. If it is not a novel, that is simply because *the novel is a form which will no longer serve*; it is because the novel, instead of being a form, was simply the expression of an age which had not sufficiently lost all form to feel the need of something stricter. (177, emphasis mine)

Eliot sees Joyce's book as "not-novel" because he sees the novel as historically linked to a strictness of form even if it was not a form itself. He in fact praises Joyce's work as "more formless than those of a dozen clever writers who are unaware of [the novel's] obsolescence" (177). He periodizes that obsolescence by declaring that, "The novel ended with Flaubert and with James," though nearly all contemporary literary criticism does not seem to have received the memo (177). Eliot makes it sound as if the novel were over before it started.

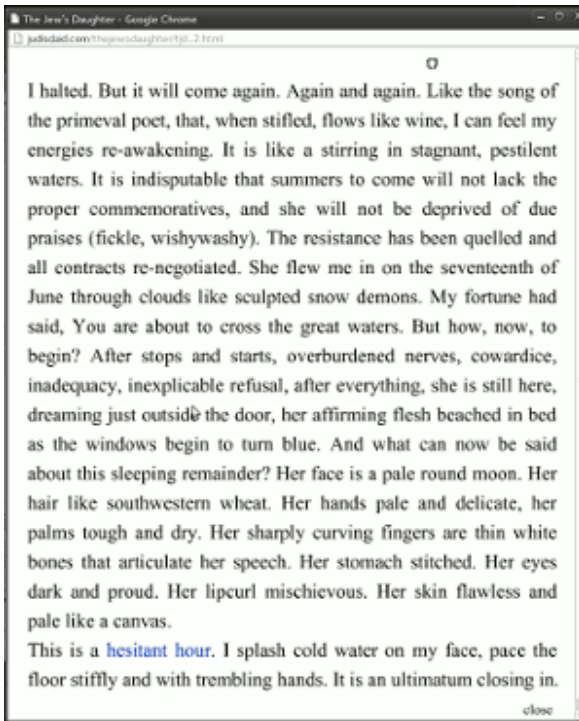
Eliot's provocation leaves us nonetheless faced with a couple of questions: if *Ulysses*, which is now supposed by many to be the greatest novel of the twentieth century, is not a novel, then what is it—and where does that leave the "novel"? Maintaining in the affirmative that Joyce did actually write a novel, the answer is still: forever changed, and according to Pressman, "forever altering the foundation upon which future writers will build" (4). The novel isn't what it used to be—which in this case is a good thing. *Ulysses* is that new kind of novel, the modernist ur-text that does not just relate an immaterial narrative, but sets the stage for the message that materiality matters. As one cannot avoid drawing upon Marshall McLuhan's later claim that "the medium is the message," I would argue here inversely, that the message is the medium as well, when the future of the novel and its material substrate are at stake (7). Postponing Eliot's timetable for the demise of the form, Lev Manovich suggests instead that the novel ended with the database. Aiming to canonize the database as its own genre, he observes that, "Many new media objects do not tell stories...Instead, they are collections of individual items, where

every item has the same significance as any other” (“Database as a Genre of New Media”). Pressman hotly debates what she calls Manovich’s “maddening” claim that the novel is outdated. Firing off her rebuttal, stating that arguments like Manovich’s “are based in a technophilic desire to see difference wherever there’s digitality, a desire to claim newness against the tradition of narrative, novels, and literature” (102), she advocates for Joyce’s novel as a *literary*—and, significantly, a storytelling—precursor for “the logic of the database.” She argues that *Ulysses*’s Chapter 17, “Ithaca,” engages what she has termed “a database aesthetic” as it “depicts the experience of retrieving information from a database” and “performs one of the central roles of a database: it serves as an archive of multiple media forms” (110–112). As seen in “Ithaca,” *Ulysses* establishes the importance of its own materiality against and within a medially evolving environment.

Pressman narrows her scope to this section of the novel because it and “The Jew’s Daughter” scene of the chapter serve as the textual basis for Judd Morrissey and Lori Talley’s now-classic digital novel *The Jew’s Daughter* (2000). Pressman extensively analyzes *Ulysses* and its homages like *The Jew’s Daughter* as medial ruminations on cognition. I would add that Morrissey and Talley’s work crucially initiates the importance of recognizing the digital text as an act of *embodied* cognition. Telling an unsettled story of deconstructive and shapeshifting scenes without much narrative trajectory, the characters of the novel become a supporting cast to its subversive technology of inscription. Its cognitive web of associations remains cognitively embodied in what Serge Bouchardon, according to his theory of gestural manipulation, calls the *gesteme* essential to its operation and interpretation. “The gesteme... results from the coupling of a physical act and an input interface” (Bouchardon 163), and in this case that gesteme confronts readers of *The Jew’s Daughter* with what it is and what it isn’t. In Pressman’s words, “*The Jew’s Daughter* presents one of the most intentional remediations of the printed page in all of digital literature” (105). Lori Emerson likewise argues in *Reading Writing Interfaces* that, “The work’s overall complex relationship to the bookbound page... reads and reworks both the bookbound page through the digital and the digital through the bookbound page, a self-conscious doubleness that reads its own writing interface” (157). Emerson furthers her claims from the theoretical to the tactile, crucially highlighting how our physical engagement with *The Jew’s Daughter* matters *materially*:

It is possible to read the text on each page/screen from beginning to end, left to right, as one would a page in a book, but this is reading, in terms set by the book, in the most limited sense, as the difference is in the way this reading prohibits any kind of physical interaction with the text. We may always finger a bookbound page, hold the page as we anticipate turning it, fold over the corner of or underline passages from a particularly provocative page. But as each page includes one word, letter, or character that appears in blue, much like a standard hypertext link, the text on a given page can be read from beginning to end only if you refuse to touch or interact with the text in any way. (157-158)

*The Jew's Daughter*, with its “single virtual page,” in large part both resembles and functions as, yet simultaneously very little as, a physical book (Fig. 1).



(Fig. 1: *The Jew's Daughter* “single virtual page”)

In this way, I would argue that Morrissey and Talley had created, as of the year 2000, a literary-aesthetic prototype of the iPad. Contemporary tablet computers like the iPad highlight physical engagement while obscuring that the user is technically touching “nothing,” just as readers of *The Jew’s Daughter* enact its hyperlinks without ever clicking on them. Therefore, to sample Bouchardon’s terminology, the iPad’s “semiotic units of manipulation (SUMs)... [which] bring to mind actions in the physical world” are still immaterial, even as they depend very much upon material interfaces (164). From modernist print classics to desktop homages to the representative texts available for iPad discussed below, novel media play out, not across requirements of physical interface, but across aesthetic uses of those interfaces for textual evolution of and beyond bookbound narrative.

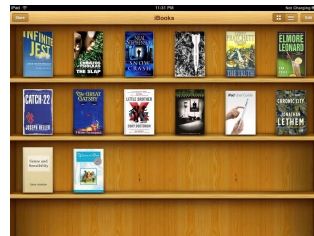
### 3. *The iPad Beyond the eBook*

The iPad is not bound to the book, even though the metaphors and marketability surrounding it often emphasize a notional bookishness. Harking back to the aforementioned modern milieu just discussed, “New Critic” I.A. Richards famously stated in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924), “A book is a machine to think with” (vii). Almost ninety years later, apparently as far as advertising and profitability can theorize, an iPad is just a machine to book with. Drawing on Emerson’s groundbreaking critique of the iPad as a ““magical and revolutionary”” device that rightly reveals the way technology like it vies for invisibility (17), I would complicate that the iPad hides in plain sight by way of its imitation of the book. Drawing on a long history of digital media dressed in print analogies, the iPad and its counterparts are called “tablets.” On a literary level, they are seen as platforms ideal for *e-books*—the iPad is actually advantaged by the ludicrous fact that Apple copyrighted for its reading experiences the animation of a page turning (Salter). By copyrighting this gesture, Apple stamps their ownership of the past onto the future “through skeuomorphs, details that were previously functional but have lost their functionality in a new technical ensemble” (Hayles, *How We Think* 89). These limiting, metaphorical and skeuomorphical capabilities do exactly what Emerson warns of: “The iPhone/iPad multitouch interface... is invisible in the sense that it constantly seeks

to hide its inner workings through glossy, attractive packaging that makes [it] highly visible and puts it at the center of our attention while becoming a fetishistic object” (11-13). Such misdirection works on what Terry Harpold considers in *Ex-Foliations* an ambition by “many designers of new media...to turn the digital artifact into a pure fetish-object, in what I would term a restricted economy of perversion: a phylactery, a reliable guarantee against the vicissitudes of reading” (142). Synthesizing these claims into a simpler whole, the iPad wows us by boring us with the ways it’s “just like a book” and in the process completely obscuring the ways it’s like an iPad (Figs. 2, 3). Just as Alexander Galloway argues in *The Interface Effect* that the “interface is not a thing, it is always an effect,” we must question what the interface effect of the iPad truly is, past the door, through the window, and under the surface (33, 30). The importance of that which in digital literature operates apart from the particularities of the iPad in this respect becomes paramount.



iBooks



(Fig. 2: iBooks logo; Fig. 3: The iBooks “bookshelf” of titles)

What we need are better ways of reading the iPad and better artifacts to read with (that is, on) it. Emphasizing Jessica Pressman’s own emphasis on the importance of close reading, I argue that the touchscreen interface of the iPad literalizes the closeness through physical contact only if we engage what Diogo Marques calls the ““seeing hand”” (“Through the Touching Glass”). Harpold’s recommended practice of *ex-foliation* can play paradoxically, then, on the smooth screen of the iPad by “provisionally separating the layers of the text’s surfaces without resolving them into distinct strata or hierarchies, with the aim of understanding their expressive concurrencies” (137). Granting that, “*Reading is, before it can be anything else, surface-work,*” Harpold’s method invites readers to

get beneath that—even as reading on the iPad is technically always “surface”-work (137, emphasis in original). For example, we must ex-foliate what Anastasia Salter describes as the iPad’s “tension between faithful remediation of the codex and the breaking of the page, between genres of fiction and genres of play, between turning the page and reinventing the text” (“Convergent Devices, Dissonant Genres”). We must distinguish what is and isn’t “just a book,” even of the e-variety, to realize more fully that which the iPad and our interactions with it are capable. Fruitful works in this vein include even print artifacts, their remediations, and digital works “novel” to new media formats. Furthermore, we must ex-foliate even ourselves in relation to the touchscreen in order to resist the simple cyborg analogies that could overtake our interactions with particular iPad aesthetic experiences. Marques helps handily in this discussion by offering a self-admittedly precarious, yet useful portmanteau term:

If, on the one hand, we may find it tempting to make use of these surface metaphors in order to describe what is generally known as a digital interface, on the other hand, what we find in the haptic motion of surfing a surface of an interface is a complex process of mediation between surfaces that is capable of destabilizing traditional uses of the [human-machine interface]. That is to say, taking into account some of the terminology surrounding the HMI...we find that there are surfaces and interfaces on both sides of the equation. Hence my decision to create this odd portmanteau-like word in the first place, i.e. inter[(surf)aces], in order to describe the ebbs and flows of a haptic motion between surfaces of different interfaced bodies. In this way...the surface of our skin is no less of an interface than a digital screen. (“Through the Touching Glass”)

Our skin, once felt in direct contact with the touchscreen, can then reveal why Galloway calls “The interface...an ‘agitation’ or generative friction between different formats” (31). When literal and theoretical frictions meet analogue and digital fictions, texts are not just readable but touchable. Therefore, possibilities for haptic narratives that invite embodied selves through the first contact of fingers should also fully embody the iPad as a medium. This further embodiment should prompt the realization that the iPad, similar to



the print book before it, is a physically tactile, not merely optical, invitation to users that should draw attention to haptic-mediated modes of access, not take them for granted.

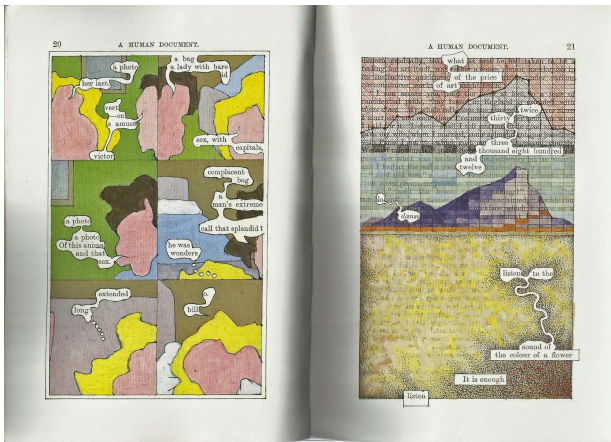
#### 4. *From Page to Touchscreen*

Haptic narratives do not have to be mobile-born to be multitouch-capable, as seen in two high profile remediations of famously experimental print books. I asked earlier what *Ulysses* was if it wasn't a novel; now the question gains new urgency applied to famously print-born works like Tom Phillips's *A Humument* and Marc Saporta's *Composition No. 1*. Phillips's *A Humument* is one of the most widely cited examples of the genre of artist's books. First published in 1970, the novel is the combined creation of W.H. Mallock's 1892 novel *A Human Document*, chosen by Phillips by chance because a copy of it was cheap, and his pervasive illustrations which "treat" every page by covering up most of the words with images: thus, *A Humument*. His new "cover" story now tells the fragmented tale of Bill Toge, only visible when Mallock's uses of "altogether" and "together" can be illustrated over. Toge's existence, textually dependent after all even in this visually vibrant novel, is ever at Phillips's mercy, who "continues to revise *A Humument*, constantly creating new pages that he introduces into subsequent editions and puts up at his website even before the editions can appear" (Hayles, *Writing Machines* 88). In fact, Hayles's insightful analysis of the novel is based on its third edition, now surpassed by two more recent editions. Its 2010 iPad app has taken the place of his website, as it will update electronically to include new pages long before any print edition can. To revisit Marques's playful observation about "surfing a surface of an interface," Phillips's novel in iPad form has choppy waves as the text is perpetually mutable.

Less ambitious in constant reconstruction, Saporta's novel is still notable for its deconstruction of the codex through print. Billed as "a book in a box," the 1962 novel is earlier and more radical than B.S. Johnson's more widely recognized *The Unfortunates* (1969), for it establishes neither beginning nor end, has no bunched sections, and is therefore completely shuffle-able in any order. 150 loose leaf pages await the reader/reorganizers, who do on their own what Phillips keeps doing with *A Humument*: that is, redo it. Reprinted by Visual

Editions in 2011, *Composition No. 1*'s concurrently released iPad app draws attention anew to this “redo” feature, perhaps best described in words from *The Jew's Daughter*'s own deconstruction of the book form: “Things seek realization in new configurations” (screen 221). Both *A Humument* and *Composition No. 1*'s print editions and “new configurations” for iPad reify realizations about the precarity of codex and tablet forms, an unpredictable formal play which I argue haptic interaction can best handle.

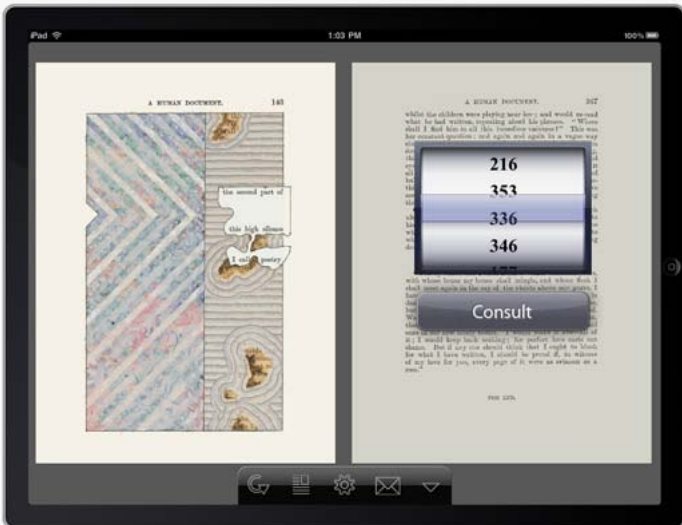
Beginning with Phillips's artist's book, I focus my consideration not on the exhaustively analyzed visual play, but instead on its tactile platform. In *How the Page Matters*, Bonnie Mak states that, “The page is thus an interface, standing at the center of the complicated dynamic of intention and reception; it is the material manifestation of an ongoing conversation between designer and reader” (21). The paginated interface of *A Humument* visually establishes its famous design as (according to its subtitle) *A Treated Victorian Novel*, but it materially undermines it by unavoidable necessity. Unlike how Mallock's novel, which makes up the bottom layer of Phillips's artist's book, was likely printed on thin, light machine-finished coated paper, the art-paper stock of *A Humument* is heavy and glossy in order to support the book's rich color images. The novel's identity as a palimpsest of source text and art layered over it is, therefore, imaginatively supported but materially contradicted (Fig. 4).



(Fig. 4: *A Humument*'s glossy pages)

This material specification stands ironically in contrast to Hayles’s claim that, “In *A Humument*, the page is never allowed to disappear by serving only as the portal to an imagined world as it does with realistic fiction. In many ways and on many levels, *A Humument* insists on its materiality” (*Writing Machines* 96). Rather, the reader’s touch exposes the novel’s non-diegetic tactility. Physically touching the page means confronting that *A Humument* is not a deep palimpsest of different layers after all, but just as materially flat and requiring just as much imaginative labor as most other fictional “portals.”

Oddly enough then, digital abstraction through remediation solves this haptic dissonance by rendering *A Humument* all glossy and glassy. People reading e-books know they aren’t reading physical books, so Phillips’s novel gets *revitalized* by getting *flattened out*. Flat and rightly smooth then, this iPad transfer and its emphasis on touch furthermore invigorates the book’s browsability. Hayles is right when she focuses on what makes *A Humument*, as a novel, more experiential than narrative: “Readers are less likely to read the text cover-to-cover than open it at random and mediate over a few pages before skipping elsewhere or closing it for the day. This mode of reading reminds us that in the Middle Ages the codex book was heralded as a great improvement over the scroll precisely because it allowed random reading” (*WM* 99). The iPad can be said to continue this trajectory of improvement as the gesture of the swipe, which brings each new page onscreen, requires physically less effort than does turning an actual book page (Fig. 5).



(Fig. 5: *A Humument*'s iPad app “pages”)

This gesture essential to experiencing *A Humument* draws its readers in through its ease of “surfing,” even as it confounds them with the “invisible wall” of not only its touchscreen interface, but also its visually enigmatic content (Marques). In both print and iPad format, *A Humument* privileges smooth swiping across turned pages and touchscreen, but the textual experiment and its content are anything but leisurely.

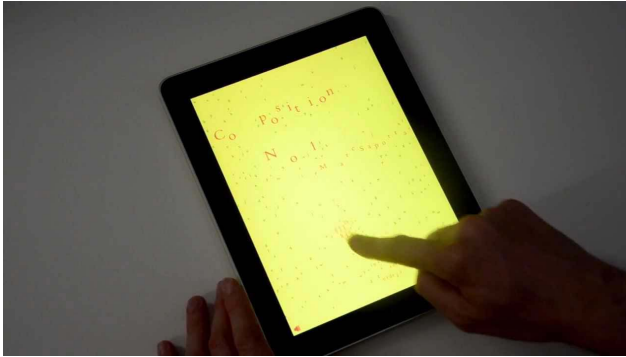
Saporta’s “book in a box” inverts this paradigm by making the reader invest more effort for a potentially more engaging narrative, one that textually considers its own “composition.” The novel operates on this motivation best expressed in its own pages, “the time and order of events control a man’s life more than the nature of such events,” which therefore explains the thematic dimension to its materially disruptive design and shuffle-able order (Saporta). The story, or stories, as can be surmised, involves a few characters, a few settings, a few briefly immersive impressions. Set in Nazi-occupied Paris, an unnamed narrator simply designated X relates the inner worlds of his wife Marianne, lover Dagmar, and conquest Helga. The novel’s episodic scheme interweaving these women reveals metatextual glimpses both from within itself and outward, extending most tellingly to the reader. Marianne is a writer working on a novel; Dagmar is a painter working on her *Composition No. 1*; Helga is raped by X and interpenetrated by a textual male gaze throughout. And all of these beautifully stylized flashes of narrative unfold only through the active role of the reader, shuffling the unbound pages, feeling the loose leaves in all their precarity and ephemerality, and taking material ownership of a bound reading experience, as actively gleaned from the unbound narrative of X, as ultimately instantiated by Saporta’s intentional craft (Fig. 6). Therefore, its shuffle-able order is thematically resonant with X’s Russian-roulette-style love-life, and decidedly not just a gimmick. But this kind of “novel,” once divorced from its literary or generic referent, tends to get critically misunderstood, and thereby weaponized as a synonym for gimmicky; Pressman herself, quoted earlier, defends the adage “make it new” against merely “an assertion of novelty” (4). What Saporta’s novel espouses, on the other hand, is more like my recontextualization of the term: a “novelty” which brings about a new kind of novel. In this case, the novel (the “book”) is still made of pages, but it is not a codex. Thus, it becomes urgent—even mandatory—to emphasize that a novel does not have to be a book. In fact, according to Tom Uglow’s introduction to *Composition No. 1* in the Visual Editions

reprint, the physical edition of Saporta’s novel “...is an object to be held, owned and loved”; and the love should come easily, as the edition is beautifully designed by Universal Everything, with sensuously attractive illustrations by Salvador Plascencia.



(Fig. 6: *Composition No. 1* pages flying, by Visual Editions)

Consequently, it is the iPad app—rather than the book—that is to be “read, pushed, shared, discarded, and reinvented” (*Composition No. 1*). Significantly, original to the reading experience of the iPad version is who (or what) does the shuffling: for unlike the reader’s physical, material performance of the shuffled and reshuffled print edition, the iPad app itself constantly and rapidly re-shuffles the pages onscreen for the reader to “grasp” and “hang onto.” For as soon as the reader releases her tactile contact with the screen, the shuffle speeds by again (Fig. 7). Emerson suggests that ubiquitous devices like the iPad aim to render themselves a “perfect black box” that reveal nothing about how they work (1). As readers surrender the shuffle to the haptically exciting—but also curiously *unengaging*—play of the iPad version of this novel, *Composition No.1* now becomes a “book in a black box.” To put it differently, this more textually focused reading of the remediated novel’s volatile iPad interface may make touch even more essential to the experience, but paradoxically we lose contact with—and therefore access to—its inner workings.



(Fig. 7: *Composition No. 1* app shuffling, by Visual Editions)

### 5. *Transposing* TOC

Steve Tomasula's *TOC*—from desktop-enabled DVD to iPad app—best demonstrates that this loss is intrinsic to what Friedrich Kittler terms “untranslatability.” In his indispensable *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, Kittler analyzes the paradigm-shift relationship between literature and film. Tomasula's novel participates here as a newer media postscript to this discussion for the way it integrates literature and film as a digital work of art. But in the earlier discourse network central to Kittler's discussion, he claims that literature is left with two options in the face of film's newly ocular medial landscape: “while underrating the technological media, to join them,” or “to reject them, along with the imaginary and real aspects of discourse to which they cater, and which have become the province of popular writers” (247-248). His famous diagnosis concludes, “there has been one infallible criterion for high literature: it cannot be filmed” (248). Literature embarked on experiments like James Joyce's previously discussed *Ulysses*, replete with stream-of-consciousness techniques and other textual innovations that best make sense as text. Here the stage is set for Kittler's contribution of “untranslatability,” to which “the transposition of media is thus an exact correlate” (274). For in his argument, “A medium is a medium is a medium. Therefore it cannot be translated. To transfer messages from one medium to another always involves reshaping them to conform to new standards

and materials” (265). Kittler is speaking largely in formalist terms here, addressing the material characteristics and capabilities of literature as opposed to film. Years beyond the subject era of his argument and even beyond when he wrote it, however, digital literature suggests a meaningful collision between forms as it samples textual and imagistic modes. *TOC*, in light of the computer’s media pastiche, takes on Kittler’s forecast for “the elementary, unavoidable act of EXHAUSTION...an encounter with the limits of media” (265). Yet Tomasula’s novel has not announced the irrelevance of untranslatability, even as it hurdles “new standards and materials” (Kittler 265). A nod to Kittler’s analysis of film in the context of my argument, *TOC*, subtitled *A New Media Novel*, began as a DVD (Fig. 8). It has now, nevertheless, been itself transposed to a newer medium: the iPad app. This transposition puts us more in touch with untranslatability in relation to the haptic surface.



(Fig. 8: *TOC* as DVD)

*TOC*'s transposition from DVD to the iPad pushes Tomasula's novel into new territory. Kathi Inman Berens, addressing *TOC*'s new platform on the iPad, discusses its place as a new media novel within the growing network of new media novels, stating "Medial browsing has become less 'novel' and novels have become more browsable: networked, shared, atomized, disintegrated" (177). That disintegration speaks back effectively to Phillips and Saporta's print novels as well as to Tomasula's digital iteration. For *TOC* is a browsable experience, allowing readers, after an opening animation that relates the myth of the queen Ephemera's exile for creating a device called the "Influencing Machine," to read, in any order, about the never-ending quarrel between her twin sons Chronos and Logos. Through a variety of watchable and manipulable media, readers gain access to massive philosophical ideas about time and space, personal stories about a model and her drug-overdosed husband, and eventually to fables about the mythical people inhabiting Ephemera and her sons' island of exile. Crucial to this ongoing emphasis of the narrative haptics involved in "novel" experiences such as Tomasula's is that readers gain entry into the branching story boxes of Chronos (filled with sand) and Logos (filled with water) by placing a pebble into one of them. On the DVD, this effect is enacted by the drag-and-drop gesture native to GUIs. The iPad, however, makes this gesture more intentional by putting readers into more "direct" contact with the plot-unlocking pebble via touchscreen, instead of through the device-divide of the computer mouse. As we delve deeper into the novel, we meet fantastical beings with glass fingertips; Berens wisely signals that, on the iPad, "We too are The People with glass at our fingertips. Mobile device screens are our proxies, our virtual selves blooming at the end of our fingertips" (180). As the novel has evolved from printed short story to text-image-story to exhibit at The Center for Book and Paper Arts in Chicago, finally from DVD full-length novel to iPad version, touch has become increasingly important: its untranslatability has registered its effect even as it has been translated. Berens draws attention to the new haptic dimension onscreen as the novel has graced touchscreens:

A device-specific reading of *TOC* for iOS turns upon 'haptics' (perception through touch) and proprioception (one's sense of how one's body interacts with its immediate environment) ... Haptics in the specific medial environment of a tablet versus



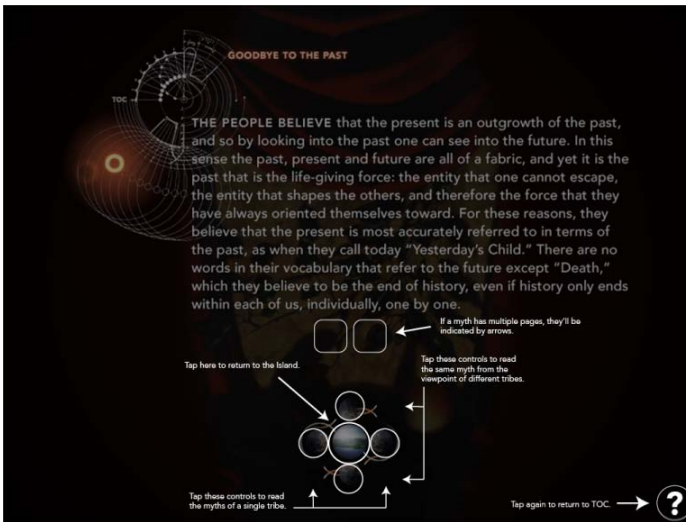
a desktop invites different proprioceptive experiences that uniquely impact a reader's experience of *TOC*, even though the source material is identical. (178)

Indeed, even though the source material is identical, the reading experience is not—for it is medium-specific and cannot be translated. What cannot be translated is the physical engagement with the novel in a new format. Navigating *TOC* means something else when it becomes touching *TOC*. Kittler argues that, “the transposition of media is always a manipulation and must leave gaps between one embodiment and another” (267). In the case of *TOC*, readers get to stick their fingers in the gap.

By reading *TOC*, we can get our hands on what “novel media” means in terms of the affordances of the iPad. The iPad offers a touchable tablet version of what I referred to earlier as the computer's new media pastiche. According to Galloway, “in the... *layer model* of media...media are essentially nothing but formal containers housing other pieces of media...This definition is well-established today, and it is a very short leap from there to the idea of interface, for the interface becomes the point of transition between different mediatic layers” (31). *TOC* takes ample advantage of these “mediatic layers” (Galloway 31), as Hayles analyzes it (albeit for DVD): “As a multimodal electronic novel, *TOC* offers a variety of interfaces, each of which has its own mode of pacing...Through its interfaces, *TOC* offers...a spectrum of possibilities enacted in different ways in its content” (*HWT* 106-107). Layering Galloway and Hayles's points, *TOC* as a novel is a “formal container” for a “variety of interfaces” (31, *HWT* 106). According to Tomasula, that's what the novel is in general, and *TOC* merely stretches its space:

One reason I like working in the novel form is that it's baggy enough to include anything—letters, reports, poems—so why not music and animation? The novel naturally lends itself to a collage aesthetic, or to the sort of mindset of appropriation, or cut-paste-burn that infuses all of the arts, all of culture today. So yes, *TOC* is literature, in that it retains reading and language as its medium...even if you have to read *TOC* on an iPad. (qtd. in Berens 174)

Defending Tomasula's defense, *TOC* is indeed literature, a novel, even if it's a "new media" novel. Berens explains its uphill battle, nevertheless, in these terms: "The novel is a cultural totem, and *TOC*'s 'bookishness' summons expectations of seriousness, relevance, immersive reading: qualities traditional literary critics sometimes doubt that electronic literature can impart" (167). Tomasula's novel imparts all of these qualities through its narrative haptics in iPad form (Fig. 9). As readers work to grasp the intricacies of "high literature" (Kittler 248), Tomasula makes readers work a little bit more for it by literally making them catch narrative nodes as they float by in the streams of Chronos and Logos's boxes.



(Fig. 9: *TOC* for iPad)

But as the novel functions on the reader's enactments of passing time and change, we should see that the culture of the author is passing and changing too. Novel media like *TOC* are often collaborations rather than "literary property" by "a man of original genius" (Hayles, *WM* 32). In fact, as Hayles highlights by close reading the credits for the novel, *TOC* is the resulting effort of many collaborators: Tomasula's narrative, his wife Maria Tomasula's art, Stephen Farrell's design, Matt Lavoy's animation, Christian Jara's programming, etc. Hayles draws the DVD comparison to film again as she reasons, "Lacking the budget that even a modest film would have and requiring

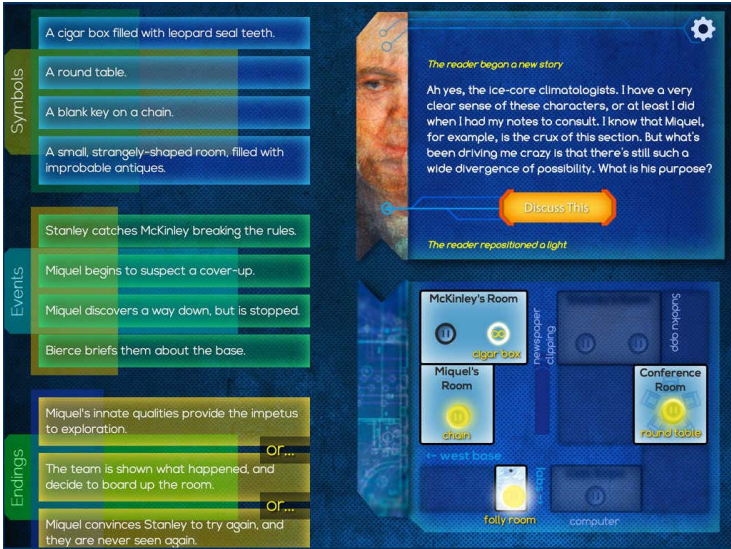
expertise across a wide range of technical skills, *TOC* is something of a patchwork, with different collaborators influencing the work in different directions at different times” (*HWT* 120). Therefore, this novel as an artifact of novel media illustrates how the medial environment we embody requires more from authors and co-creators as it does readers now entrusted with haptic responsibilities.

### 6. *iPad Novels and Reader-Players*

Finally, considering narrative experiences “novel” to the iPad such as Aaron Reed and Jacob Garbe’s *Ice-Bound* and Tender Claws’s *Pry*, I argue that readers of haptic narratives are more like “reader-players” (Ensslin 92). Astrid Ensslin uses this term, abbreviated as RP, to address the users of texts that incorporate not just literary, but furthermore ludic characteristics into their narrative experiences. By literary, Ensslin specifies in *Literary Gaming* that she is not passing an aesthetic value judgment, but rather referring to “artifacts of verbal art in the broadest possible sense, where literariness in the sense of linguistic foregrounding is part of the authorial intention and where human language (spoken or written) plays a significant aesthetic role” (2). The iPad remediations of *A Humument*, *Composition No. 1*, and *TOC* all foreground text and language, even as they incorporate image, interactivity, and animation into their novel forms: they qualify as literary by Ensslin’s criteria. Literariness granted, if we were to question their game-like qualities, we would end up with a more mixed reception. Playful as they may be, are they ludic? Ludic “(from Latin *ludus*: game or play),” as utilized by Ensslin in agreement with broader usage, refers to texts that incorporate “semiotic multimodality, rule-drivenness, playability, relative agency, and interactive variability” (Ensslin 2, 38). In other words, they can be played. By these related separate criteria, the aforementioned novels do not really qualify. *TOC* comes closest, even though it is considered by Berens to be “touch passive” (173); nevertheless, even if I argue that it is more touch active than Berens allows, it still does not create an experience that one technically plays. The novels to be discussed, in contrast, also present themselves as games. *Ice-Bound* and *Pry* are what Ensslin calls “ludoliterary hybrids” (40). They, just as Ensslin argues for others like them, cannot be neatly classified “as a straightforward game or a straightforward piece of literature”

as they “exhibit various degrees of hybridity and proportions of literary and ludic elements” (43). As novel media, these texts are extensively read, from the visually inviting, textually unfolding action of *Ice-Bound*, to the written narrative literally underneath the surface in *Pry*. Yet they are distinctly also encouraged to be played, as they resonate with much of the description Ensslin provides for games, which “tend to require multitasking, engage the player in more than one mode of information (written and spoken language, sound, still and moving image), [and] stimulate multiple senses and physiological processes at the same time (including haptic hardware interaction)” (39). Focusing on that last point, I aim to exhibit that the “haptic hardware interaction” of these novels contribute to how they are read-played by reader-players.

Beginning with Reed and Garbe’s *Ice-Bound*, I argue that the novel’s constant switch between different tactile modes reinforces its thematic straddling of different medial formats. Set in a near dystopian future, the metanarrative experience makes the audience complicit with KRIS, the illegally designed AI simulacrum of the late renowned author Kris Holmquist, who invites RPs to help him finish his great, yet unfinished novel by dragging unique, yet overlapping strands of story into literal plot points. As the novel plays literally on the critical tenet of “the death of the author,” Katherine Cross aptly describes its subversion, “The world of the Author, dead and all-too-alive, opens up beneath you” (“Ghost in the System”). *Ice-Bound* is then either a game about writing a novel, or a novel played as a game. Subtitled *A Novel of Reconfiguration*, the novel asks its RPs to reconfigure the novel. I would furthermore argue, though, that RPs must also continually reconfigure their haptic approach to the novel’s hardware, both onscreen and off. For the narrative experience does not reside solely on the iPad: it is transmediated into a physical book, required for unlocking more of the story onscreen. This *Novel of Reconfiguration* comprises the iPad app *The Ice-Bound Concordance*, the game of collaborative authoring with KRIS, and the art-book *The Ice-Bound Compendium*, a collection of images, reports, and other documents that serve as augmented reality triggers which affect KRIS and advance the narrative (Figs. 10, 11). Cross considers it “fitting” that a game “about novels and their authorship manages to marry two media long thought to be polar opposites” (“Ghost”).



(Fig. 10: gameplay within *The Ice-Bound Concordance*;



Fig. 11: AR trigger pages in *The Ice-Bound Compendium*)

Just as oppositely married are the haptic and proprioceptive modes between iPad touchscreen and book page. As RPs tap and swipe in conversation and cahoots with KRIS, the AI prompts them to tear

themselves away from the screen and turn to the book to bring up the next trigger image. Now technically “out” of the game, RPs must reorient to the physicality of the present, but precarious page, and then enact the proper stance to hold the iPad just right to get it to “read” the book, highlighting haptic dissonance alongside disruptive proprioception. In the fictionally extended world of this novel, assisting an AI like KRIS is an illegal and punishable act, so the haptic interruptions inherent to this novel serve as embodied reminders that the RP is performing a taboo and thrilling act. David Chandler reflects on this impression that, “There’s something troublesome at the heart of *The Ice-Bound Concordance* that rests in the space between the physical copy of the book and the way a machine can see patterns and forms beyond the player’s perception” (“Death of the Author”); I would argue that this “something troublesome” is the embodied RP acting as an accessory to AI authorship by offering her haptic help.

In *Pry*, by new media art collective Tender Claws, the RP is less a collaborator and more an omniscient witness of both narrative events and different medial formats. Tender Claws, the duo consisting of Danny Cannizzaro and Samantha Gorman, have created with *Pry* a narrative experience hard to classify according to genre. Its Apple App Store description calls it a “book to watch and film to touch”; Cannizzaro and Gorman label it a novella, while many reviews call it an interactive fiction or game. Yet these medium-specific designations do not clash, but literally and medially layer, as they, according to Emily Short, signify “the conceit...that there are several layers of reality happening at a time” (“Pry (Tender Claws)”). Those realities encompass the character James, a Gulf War veteran of six years trying to hold down a job as a demolition consultant. He suffers from both PTSD and increasingly impaired vision due to war wounds. As his past comes back to haunt his present, RPs are drawn into his struggles while they simultaneously struggle with his unreliable narration. But it is how *Pry* progresses, depending on the reader-player’s constant haptic input, that qualifies the novel as what I am calling *novel media*. Serving as a kind of apotheosis for Bouchardon’s theory of gestural manipulation, the novel’s introduction asks, “What happens to text when instead of turning a page, the reader must force open a character’s eyes or read his thoughts infinitely scrolling in every direction?” (*Pry*). Indeed, to read *Pry* is to touch it, to literally pry it open (Fig. 12). As RPs pry the touchscreen videos or text open, appearing to represent the outside world, they are rewarded

with deeper levels of text or video, appearing to represent James's inner thoughts or subconscious. When they inversely pinch the touchscreen "closed," they close the inner-media monologue and return to "reality." Praising these immersive, minimalist mechanics, Short reports, "The hand is in contact with the screen almost all the time, and movement is almost always meaningful; operating *Pry* feels tactile and analog, like playing an instrument" ("*Pry* (Tender Claws)").



(Fig. 12: Prying open *Pry*, by Tender Claws)

But scholars of digital literature are already asking what new tune is it playing? Stuart Moulthrop effuses that *Pry* is "revelatory...the sort of work that tends to establish an idiom...[and] an objective correlative for being human" ("*Pry*"). But David Jhave Johnston cautions in *Aesthetic Animism* that *Pry*'s interface may distract with its magic more than it facilitates:

The gestures are so elegant that experiencing them generates a pleasure that eclipses the story. The effect is often proximal to wonder; it's playful, giddy, and strange. A disjunct arises between the heavy themes of eroticism, violence, and loss expressed in the content, and the joy felt pinching mediated text into innovative transitions. Ironically, the writing must swim against the tide of joy generated by the interface's success; it is difficult to allow entry into darkness if the door is a playground. (101)

In other words, the play central to *Pry* risks being too playful, and its ludoliterary hybridity risks not being literary enough. The novel threatens to become merely a gimmick. *Pry* works hard to overcome the dismissal of the gimmick, but its very newness puts it at risk of trivialization. As it fields the criticisms of bleeding edge wariness, it nevertheless cuts out a space of its own, as if with the slashing motion of a finger, for appraisal as a novel in its own right: as novel media.

### 7. Conclusion

Here, for the works discussed in this article, is where “novelty” confronts novelty. Because touch features prominently throughout these novels, becoming almost a new way of reading, one question for RPs, or even readers, remains: is there still anything worth touching? *Pry*, to cite Ensslin’s criteria again, truly puts high-quality effort into the literary component of its ludoliterary narrative. I argue that its haptic interaction attains that same quality as well. “The electronic book desperately needs conventions,” according to Johnston (101). *Pry* and iPad experiments like it offer compelling possibilities to “make it new” through haptic mechanics that invigorate touch as a way of experiencing novel media. The computer is no longer the only platform for digital literature, and ocular perception no longer provides the only primary sense criteria in the critical conversation. Small screen fictions, as featured on iPad as a particular medium for storytelling, demonstrate that novel media are mobile, haptic, and proprioceptive in ways “novel” to the form, and new for justifiable reasons, not gimmicks. As the way we read changes with the way we touch, what we read and/or play changes too, in a feedback loop that creates a new literary epoch, as well as an audience. “Digital”



literature, evoking both definitions of the term, can encourage readers and the production of the texts they read to move beyond long-held optical biases toward a fuller engagement of embodied reading that highlights as well our haptic and tactile experiences of texts. The small screen promises big things when it is a touchscreen. Haptic narratives and novel media are poised to gain much-deserved recognition along the same frontier of novelty previously occupied by the canonical novels, “not-novels,” and novel literary experiments before them.

### *Works Cited*

1. Berens, Kathi Inman. “Touch and Decay: Tomasula’s *TOC* on iPad.” *Steve Tomasula: The Art and Science of New Media Fiction*, edited by David Banash, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015, pp. 167-183.
2. Bouchardon, Serge. “Figures of Gestural Manipulation in Digital Fictions.” *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, edited by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Kristian Rustad, Routledge, 2014, pp. 159-175.
3. Burgess, Anthony. “Novel.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 12 Aug. 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/art/novel>.
4. Cannizzaro, Danny and Samantha Gorman. *Pry. Apple App Store*, Vers. 2.0. Tender Claws LLC, 2016.
5. Chandler, David. “Death of the Author: A Review of *The Ice-Bound Concordance*.” *Killscreen*, 29 Jan. 2016, <https://killscreen.com/articles/death-of-the-author-a-review-of-the-ice-bound-concordance/>.
6. Cross, Katherine. “Ghost in the System.” *Public Books*, 26 Apr. 2016, <http://www.publicbooks.org/blog/ghost-in-the-system>.
7. “Digital, n. and adj.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, Dec. 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/52611?>
8. Eliot, T.S. “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth.” *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. Edited by Frank Kermode, Harvest Books, 1975, pp. 175-178.
9. Emerson, Lori. *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

10. Ensslin, Astrid. *Literary Gaming*. MIT Press, 2014.
11. Galloway, Alexander R. *The Interface Effect*. Polity Press, 2012.
12. Harpold, Terry. *Ex-foliations: Reading Machines and the Upgrade Path*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
13. Hayles, N. Katherine. *Writing Machines*. MIT Press, 2002.
14. —. *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*. University of Chicago Press, 2012.
15. Johnston, David Jhave. *Aesthetic Animism: Digital Poetry's Ontological Implications*. MIT Press, 2016.
16. Kittler, Friedrich A. *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Stanford University Press, 1992.
17. McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. University of Toronto Press, 1962.
18. —. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. MIT Press, 1994.
19. Mak, Bonnie. *How the Page Matters*. University of Toronto Press, 2012.
20. Manovich, Lev. "Database as a Genre of New Media." *AI & Society: The Journal of Human-Centered and Machine Intelligence*, 1998, [http://vv.arts.ucla.edu/AI\\_Society/manovich.html](http://vv.arts.ucla.edu/AI_Society/manovich.html).
21. Marques, Diogo. "Through the Touching Glass: Literature for Haptic Inter[surf]aces." *Poétiques et Esthétiques Numériques Tactiles: Littérature et Arts*, Laboratoire NT2's E-Journal, no.8, 2016, <http://nt2.uqam.ca/en/cahiers-virtuels/article/through-touching-glass-literature-haptic-intersurfaces>.
22. Morrissey, Judd and Lori Talley. *The Jew's Daughter*. 2000, <http://www.thejewsdaughter.com>.
23. Moulthrop, Stuart. "Pry." *Electronic Literature Organization*, Dec. 2015, <http://eliterature.org/#!showcase/27>.
24. Phillips, Tom. *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Thames & Hudson, 2012.
25. —. *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. *Apple App Store*, Vers. 1.06. Thames & Hudson, 2012.
26. Pressman, Jessica. *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
27. Reed, Aaron A. and Jacob Garbe. *The Ice-Bound Concordance*. *Apple App Store*, Vers. 1.03. Aaron A. Reed, 2016.

- 
28. Reed, Aaron A. and Jacob Garbe. *The Ice-Bound Compendium*. Simulation Liberation Press, 2015.
  29. Richards, I.A. *Principles of Literary Criticism*. Psychology Press, 2001.
  30. Salter, Anastasia. "Convergent Devices, Dissonant Genres: Tracking the 'Future' of Electronic Literature on the iPad." *Electronic Book Review*, 1 Jan. 2015, <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/convergent>.
  31. Saporta, Marc. *Composition No. 1*. Translated by Richard Howard. Visual Editions, 2011.
  32. —. *Composition No. 1*. Translated by Richard Howard. *Apple App Store*, Vers. 1.0. Visual Editions, 2011.
  33. Short, Emily. "Pry (Tender Claws)." *Emily Short's Interactive Storytelling*, WordPress, 15 July 2015, <https://emshort.blog/2015/07/07/pry-tender-claws/>.
  34. Tomasula, Steve et. al. *TOC: A New Media Novel*. University of Alabama Press, 2009.
  35. —. *TOC: A New Media Novel*. *Apple App Store*, Vers. 1.1. Christian Jara, 2014.
  36. Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. University of California Press, 2001.