From Hemingway to Twitterature: The short and shorter of it

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**Abstract**

With every status update and tweet, the millions of individuals on social-networking sites are more than staying connected—they are reading, writing, editing, distilling, and interpreting the written word more than any generation in history. In doing so, they are helping develop Fiction 2.0: a fascinating marriage of character-count restrictions and the network effect that has created a new category of short-form content and narrative experimentation. This paper explores five of these new fiction prototypes—twitterature, nanofiction, crowd-sourced narratives, infographics, and $0.00 stories—in order to better understand how the e-age will cross-pollinate foreign concepts like "install-base" with familiar ones like "readership."

On themes of adolescent love, teen pregnancy, and terminal illness, the story "Love Sky" became the number-one selling novel in Japan in 2007. Its author, Mika, wrote it one sentence at a time—not at a computer or at a desk, but on her cell phone, sending it to her readers one line at a time. In a country where commuters read a few screens' worth of narrative between subway stops, novels are not simply being written on cellular telephones, they are being devoured on them. In 2007, ninety-eight cell phone novels were published as books, five of which became best-sellers. A few, like Mika's "Love Sky," were even adopted into movies. Today, the Japanese cell phone novel market is valued at $36 million.

Here in America, many would argue cell phone users are less interested in novels than Facebook Status Updates. I know I am. But the benefits of our social connectedness goes beyond greater sharing, awareness, and communication—writers in today's e-age are using short-form content in fascinating new ways, marrying character-count constrictions and the network effect to crowd-source stories, experiment with form, and engage in direct-distribution tactics. While in Japan, the language itself is better suited for cell phone novels, here in the States the SMS screen may end up being more significant for how it is inspiring a new generation of mobile authors to experiment with prototypes for future forms of fiction. In this age of texting, the littlest texts may matter most.

The most prolific texter of all time might have been Ernest Hemingway. Legend holds the author's proudest work was just six words long: "For Sale: baby shoes, never worn." He allegedly wrote the piece to win a bet—an experiment in and of itself—and it's safe to say no Twitter feed in all its 140-character potency has chirped out anything so powerful.

With just a few words, Hemingway crafted a compliment to the forms of fiction his audience already loved, that he himself had already mastered, and by revealing little, provided much—a prototype should the mainstream desire it.

This essay explores five new fiction prototypes exclusive to today's digital era. They are experimental, so much so that Hemingway himself might not have bet on them. But as the book and novel—the written word itself—fight to maintain a foothold against the sexier mediums swirling all around them, we owe it to ask ourselves what ecosystem is being built for the fiction of the future. After all, the millions of individuals on social-networking sites are more than staying connected with one another—they are reading, writing,
What new forms of written storytelling will this Internet generation desire and which are they already creating? Given we find ourselves amidst Web 2.0, exploring Generation One of e-reader technology, which of these online narrative experiments—twitterature, nanofiction, crowd-sourced narratives, infographics, and $0.00 stories—will we look back on as the catalyst for Fiction 2.0, our own version of the Japanese cell phone novel?

**Twitterature**

Twitter, the social-networking site that imposes a 140-character limitation on each communication or “tweet,” originally launched in 2006 with the intention of connecting small groups through SMS messaging. By September 2010, that small group had swelled to 145 million users, and they stay connected through not just SMS but dedicated websites and stand-alone desktop and smartphone applications. The restriction on character count has had a broadening effect, redefining what it means to be published in the first place. Twitterers are not just colonizing a new realm of short-form creativity; they are leveraging the network effect to rope some portion of Twitter’s worldwide community into their personal readership.

To use a tweet to explain:

Twitter has grown steadily on two behaviors—users who acquire followers and users who become one themselves, following others. Substitute user for any artist you want—musician, painter, writer—and Twitter’s function gains a derivative beyond communication or awareness: This is how one builds fandom, celebrity. It’s the model for literary upstarts everywhere; we authors who wish to acquire readers are ever-reading ourselves, following the authors we ourselves came to admire. It’s no surprise, then, to see Twitter give rise to not just a new, condensed short-form of writing, but to whole new audiences that gobble it up. A new micro-fandom for micro-lit: twitterature.

Rick Moody, who established his audience with the novels *Garden State* and *The Ice Storm*, tapped into Twitter’s followers by publishing a story over 153 consecutive tweets. He is an example of an author who found a way to enable his print readership by way of Twitter—already the owner of a traditional audience, he used Twitter to galvanize and grow it. “Some Contemporary Characters” was a short story exclusive to Electric Literature, but the unique delivery device gave Moody and his catalogue plenty of buzz as multiple lit feeds “re-tweeted” the story to their followers. Though Moody admitted his story was “absolutely written ground up on Twitter, for Twitter, about Twitter, with the character counter page open the whole time, to keep me from going OVER,” he also acknowledged the experiment was likely a “flash in a pan.”

Don’t tell that to Matt Stewart, who, unlike Moody, rose from online anonymity to not only win over an audience in Twitter’s “pan,” but gain the publicity he needed to find a publisher that would adopt his story from monitor to the page in the first place. Feeding readers with a new tweet every 15 minutes, Stewart published his novel *The French Revolution* on Twitter, saying of the experience, “It’s tremendously rewarding to see that publishers are embracing a terrific story—and innovative (and dare I say Dickensian!) ways to connect with readers.”
Others have found Stewart-like success and not through original narratives, but Twitter-ized versions of classic ones. The Penguin release *Twitterature* summarizes 80 of the “greatest works of western literature” with less than 20 tweets, examples including *Anna Karenina*, all of the *Harry Potter*, and *Macbeth*. At the time of *Twitterature*’s publishing, its authors were just 19 years old, and it’s possible the site’s official page describes their endeavor best of all: “Twitterature provides everything you need to master the literature of the civilised world, while relieving you of the burdensome task of reading it.” Here is how the book translated portions of *Hamlet* into the language of a modern Twitter user’s personality and mannerisms (from the aptly named user, @OedipusGothplex).

- AN APPARITION! This shit just got HEAVY. Apparently people don’t accidentally fall on bottles of poison.
- Ophelia just pulled a Virginia Woolf. Funeral is on the morrow.
- @PeopleofDenmark: Don’t worry. Fortinbras will take care of thee. Peace.

Twitterature as a form has goals as varied as the billion individuals that compose its platform. As a marketing vehicle, twitterature can drive established authors to new heights; as a revealing platform, it can catapult undiscovered authors into relevance; as a bite-sized form, it can appeal to America’s mite-sized attention span. Ephemeral or not, tweets teach, informing authors new and old how to reach and entice readers who see art in character-counts as well as characters.

**Nanofiction**

Self-contained, bite-sized morsels of narrative have grown notorious under a variety of aliases, and standing beside his better-known brethren microfiction and short-shorts is maybe the most appropriately named of all: nanofiction. If twitterature is a log cabin built on 140-character slabs of lumber, nanofiction might be the tiny birdhouse out back, carved from a single piece of wood.

Definitions of microfiction range from site to site with the only real consensus being it can probably always be shorter, and the shorter it gets, the closer it inches toward nanofiction, for which any hope of definition is moot. Norton calls nanofiction “Hint Fiction” in its anthology, defining the diminutive form with a 25-word maximum. Twitterers might translate Norton’s 25-word definition to 140-characters. Whatever the name, whatever the medium, all these blurry bylaws are less important than the artistic experimentation they hope to regulate.

A few examples from Nanoism.net:

- In the absence of predators, the species invented marriage, which its members could then pride themselves on surviving, year after year.
  - Dawn Corrigan
- He leaned on her stomach, imagining he could still hear the little ghost breaths, but she pushed him away, crying, before he could be sure.
  - Mari Ness

No matter what rulebook a writer subscribes to, nanofiction packs an emotional punch, freed by its own format restrictions not unlike its poetic first cousin, the haiku. Rather than provide snapshots into character psyches, nanofiction can deliver wholly composed narratives—condensed and potent, capturing a moment in time, an unspeakable act, a family’s flaws—with less words than this very sentence. The writers of nanofiction are in ways literary bootleggers, offering us throat-searing sips from batches brewed devotedly in their basements; brewed not for taste or effect but for the sport of it, the love of it. Agreeing on an exact character-count “definition” for the form would be akin to asking the bootleggers to agree on a proof for their hooch—it misses the point of why one takes swigs of nanofiction in the first place. The stuff is strong, sharp, goes down hard, and leaves one wincing. Leaves one wanting more. It’s downright addictive.

Ben White of the nanofiction site Nanoism suggests, “Nanofiction provides stories that fit in the cracks of your day. It’s a process of literary distillation, of taking something big and unwieldy and concentrating until it fits on a cellphone screen or in a Twitter stream between shared links and the intricacies of people’s bowel movements.”
So, get addicted any way you like—use nanofiction as a narrative callisthenic to start your day (as I did above) or win some cash by dabbling in online contests. Either way, you'll find yourself at the forefront of a movement to reinvent what Polonius meant by “Brevity is the soul of wit.”

Crowd-Sourced Narratives

Why do all the narrative labor yourself? Write your story with a pal...or several hundred!

Twitter is this form’s typewriter, the mechanism that makes it all possible. Folks from all across the world take turns “tweeting” the next direction a story should turn, and together, a larger narrative coagulates—messy and blotted but pulsing with life.

Neil Gaiman, who has contributed to every market ranging from children’s books to screenplays, fittingly pitched in the first sentence for a BBC-sponsored crowd-sourced narrative in 2009: “Sam was brushing her hair when the girl in the mirror put down the hairbrush, smiled, and said, ‘We don’t love you anymore.’” BBC filtered the resulting “chaos” into a free downloadable audio-book on their site and iTunes. Entitled by the masses as “Hearts, Keys, and Puppetry,” over 120 Twitterers joined in its creation, including its cover art. Later that year, the experiment’s success led BBC to kick off another round of crowd-sourced storytelling with Meg Cabot.

Twitter users receive credit in BBC’s Press Releases for their contributions, a nice token of appreciation that only adds to the network effect already in place by a story getting published on a social networking site in the first place—folks not only retweeting the narrative, but boasting the exact timestamps when their “lines” are spoken in the audiobook. It is this open dialogue, this sense of palpable pride, that separates line-by-line narrative building from some kind of staged online improv-game. These are writers proud of art and craft, not publicity junkies, and though forced to share in the joy of releasing a polished, final product, they also get to ration out the accompanying bouts of insomnia and self-doubt many authors know all too well.

You might call the whole endeavor a bit Musketeerian—one voice from many. Or you might call it communistic—many voices reduced to one. Either way, the users, as much as what they write, are the story; not crafting ‘art by committee’ so much as ‘art by mob,’ their compositions won’t be as memorable for their content as their process. After all, crowd-sourced narratives provide an inside-peek into the creative undercurrents that flow through individuals and the groups they form—our audience, and the markets they compose.

Infographics

Seen any good infographics lately?
Infographics—aka information graphics—are visual representations of data and information. Although a well-known staple of Wired magazine, they can do more than explain hard to conceptualize systems and theories—savvy writers are now betting they can add to a story’s narrative, if not tell one themselves. Bridging the gap between short story and graphic novel, the infographic is, as a storytelling experiment, fascinating alone for what it may mean for the multimedia elements of e-literature in the future. As e-books grow in scope to include video, audio, and web content, can infographics find a place in the resulting formula?

With their story Sumedicina, Jana Lange and Kim Asendorf attempt to prove that the infographic can be a formula in and of itself. The charts in Sumedicina expand on what might otherwise have been told through text alone. The graphics don’t substitute for subtext but they do in fact reinvent what subtext can communicate. For example, Sumedicina charts out its protagonist’s mental state and drug use, and these two charts can theoretically be cross-referenced for additional insights.

In his book The Art of Subtext, Charles Baxter writes, “It is not that actions speak louder than words; they speak instead of words.” Under the right author’s guidance, a story of infographics might one day speak just as loud as both.

$0.00 Stories

The future of e-publishing is—if you are to believe recent headlines—standing at its e-crossroads. Since the announcement of Apple’s iPad and its iBookstore, the long-term success of Amazon’s Kindle suddenly has less to do with its established install base than what it does with that base in the short-term. For the two companies and the publishers that pump literature into their products, debates rage on subjects as diverse as format (EPUB vs. Mobi), pricing ($15 vs. $10), DRM-rights, technology (touch-LCD vs. e-ink), and everything between. And it’s not just Amazon and Apple volleying here—last year’s CES sprouted a host of new e-readers hard-pressed to stand apart from one another, let alone the two big brothers towering over them. The market is observing convergence and will soon observe denial as companies fight tooth-and-nail to say otherwise, specializing their products to rein in some segment of mass consumer that remains. While the implications of all these variables are astoundingly broad (variables addressed in my essay, “The Age of Binary Bookmaking,” published on Fiction Writers Review), it’s worth noting that the advent of e-publishing has, more than creating (or fracturing) a new audience and marketplace, spawned a new revolutionary delivery mechanism: not e, but free.

With free stories, no trees need to be axed—not for pages or covers or for dollars to buy them. With a little battery juice and a Wi-Fi connection, any reader with an enabled device can now own any piece of work should its creator be charitable or strategic enough to offer it free-of-charge. To be a writer in the past, it only took pen and paper. An imagination. Duty to faithful storytelling and the true characters that drove it. Only then you found a publisher and only then would the publisher anoint you an author. Today, you determine whether you are an author and building your audience is another matter altogether.

Many new writers who price their products at $0.00 are not just satisfying demand but cultivating it. Gone are the headaches of contracts and book tours and freight-charges—upstart writers can, with a few clicks, distribute their product worldwide, into pocket-sized Barnes & Noble’s and independent bookstores around the world. Whether submitting their work into online depots that specialize in free e-books like FreeE-
or reeling in rabid audiences by climbing the ranks of free-fixes on the Kindle and iPad, these writers are developing addicted fan bases eager for future for-pay releases and prior catalogue ones. For smaller publishers, one high-quality free e-book can translate into a trusting reader for other related offerings. On a macro level, there is the obvious risk that free-reading may one day come at the price of supplanting paid-reading, fans of e-reading growing accustomed until the delight of paying zero devolves into demand. Free is not a sustainable business model for any product, artistic or otherwise, and besides affecting how we gauge a creative effort’s success (free versus paid downloads; downloads versus brick-and-mortar purchases), it may affect how writers can succeed on a full-time basis at all.

Alternative pricing models may help. A step-back from free, providing readers with a subscription model might help productive authors build momentum for a larger release by providing content every week leading up to it. By subscribing to their favorite authors’ feeds, readers might not only receive his or her latest writing automatically but stay on the forefront of that artist’s work. Ongoing narratives can be bundled on a weekly or monthly basis, at a flat rate. Periodically, subscribers might even receive a signed-compilation sent to their door in return for their loyalty, as they paid a premium up-front for the content piecemeal.

Like the forms of fiction explored in this essay, the economic models that govern a “successful” career are bending to digital’s heat—more malleable now than ever before. Only time will tell what these experiments will cost in the long run. Until then, authors desperate to find an audience have, for the first time in history, a free way of doing so.

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Additional Resources:

- Augmented Reality Fiction—What happens to storytelling when imagery literally explodes off of the page?
- Use Social Networking Right—Some expert tips on how writers can build and leverage social networks.
- @shamblanderson—New York Magazine book critic Sam Anderson uses Twitter to share the best sentence he reads every day, no matter the source—book, magazine, or in one case, a snow shovel’s packaging.
stories written in a series of text messages, back when texts had small character limits. It seems that literature is progressing towards profundity in simplicity, especially as technology and literature become more mobile. Language learning will surely be influenced as more and more mobile tools become available. Twitter as a Lang From Hemingway to Twitterature: The Short and Shorter of it (hdl.handle.net), Twitter Lit: A New Creative Outlet (time.com), Advertisements. It has been a major struggle to keep to daily posting! Still trying though. Hopefully, you enjoy what you read here. If so, it takes nothing to join or follow, and I promise "No SPAM!" Feel free to let me know how you feel about the posts by writing a comment. Or just share what you see with others.