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Polyaesthetic sights and sounds:

media aesthetics in *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*, *Upgrade Soul* and *The Vampyre of Time and Memory*

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'Nobody knows what it's going to look like when we're done.
We're working on the medium and the message at the same time' (Trucco, 2013).

This article explores the notion of polyaesthetics as a contemporary media condition that relates to questions of production, reception and analysis of media objects.[1] Primarily, the paper is concerned with understanding the aesthetics of digital media works that remediate existing genres of creative practice and ultimately move towards creating new digital media forms that are conditional and provisional. The three digital works that the article analyses – *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*, *Upgrade Soul* and *The Vampyre of Time and Memory* – exemplify contemporary strategies and changing patterns of creation, distribution and reception, evidenced in how we create, read, listen to, engage with, play and understand contemporary digital works. These works are involved in the remediation of previous media and genre forms such as the children's book, graphic novel and music video, while moving towards emerging forms that do not fit the definitions of those earlier genres. The aim is not to prescribe taxonomies of media forms or suggest new genre names for emergent multimodal creative work. Rather, the works reveal the need to reconceptualise our notion of aesthetics. I introduce the term 'polyaesthetics' to address contemporary media aesthetics in an age of cultural plenitude (Bolter, 2014), exemplified by an ever increasing range of devices, media forms and strategies of creation and use, on the one hand, and, on the other, to show how digital media experiences foreground multiple sensory engagement from the audience, allowing us to reclaim a historical definition of aesthetics.

Our cultural moment – whether it is called the information age, digital culture or the late age of print (Bolter, 1991) – is characterised by cultural and aesthetic multiplicity. The proliferation of digital technologies seems to imply a convergence, but beyond technological convergence, defined by digital computing, the range and sheer number of media devices and communication channels are expanding. Furthermore, the continuous breakdown of hierarchies and overlap of cultural categories that shaped twentieth-century mass media and the arts (Levine, 1988) are being replaced by communities or special interest groups united by a shared interest (in part articulated by the Web 2.0 rhetoric that emphasises the user, groups of users and social networks (Web 2.0)). Digital media culture seems to foreground and facilitate the larger cultural and historical shifts that occur as cultural institutions change under the pressure of digitalisation. The digitalisation of print, for instance, has already led to profound changes in how we store and consume written text. Hand-held networked devices, primarily the mobile phone, are changing a whole host of media consumption practices such as watching TV and films, writing and reading texts, communicating via video, voice and text.

The experiences of the everyday have become a 'technologized everyday' (Grace, 2013). To put it in W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen's Kittlerian terms, media no longer determine our situation; they '*are* our situation" (2010, p. xxii; emphasis in original). At the same time, Lev Manovich laments that despite what he points to as an obvious inadequacy of the concept of medium, or media, to describe contemporary cultural and artistic reality, it persists:

> [R]ather than getting rid of media typology altogether, we keep adding more and more categories: 'new genres,' interactive installation, interactive art, net art. The problem with these new categories is that they follow the old tradition of identifying distinct art practices on the basis of the materials being used - only now we substitute different materials by different new technologies (2001, p. 4).

For Manovich, this suggests that we should turn to a post-media aesthetics that describes how a 'cultural object *organizes data and structures user's experience of this data*' (2001, p. 5; emphasis in original). N. Katherine Hayles' formulation of digital media echoes in part Manovich's, although it causes her to turn towards materiality rather than go beyond or transcend media as Manovich's 'post-media' suggests. She argues that the materiality that can be observed in digital objects or events 'is an emergent property created through dynamic interactions between physical characteristics and signifying strategies. Materiality thus marks a junction between physical reality and human intention' (2005, p. 3). Whether a move beyond or into media, processual and emergent situated experiences are foregrounded in both Hayles' and Manovich's notions of how media work. This crucially involves the user in the process of making sense of media.

The user is at once empowered, becoming a prosumer – in Alvin Toffler's sense – someone who combines professional roles, technologies or proficiencies with a consumer status that traditionally meant a passive role (1980).[2] In this paper I look at three works that each in their own way highlight these general shifts in media production and consumption. Multimodal and multisensory interfaces are increasingly viable and available to a larger audience because of the development of consumer-grade technologies that include features such as touch screens, gesture and motion interaction, and location awareness. Concurrently, we find a range of media strategies, aesthetic influences and styles in the media objects that are created.

Media conditions, aesthetics and polyaesthetics

The remediation of older media into newer ones involves complex processes of innovation as well as building upon existing structures, as Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation reminded us (1999). Remediated habits of interpretation and engagement with cultural artefacts are shaped through new technologies and

existing social and cultural structures and habits. Lisa Gitelman, among others, has shown that media technologies proliferate rather than neatly supersede each other, and that old media remain meaningful and recognisable as media even if they are merely used by specialists or in special situations (Gitelman, 2006). Primarily, we retain the sense-making and words to describe those media forms; radio, cinema and television still exist as cultural practices and are understood as media forms, even as their technological set-ups change. Media add up, co-evolve and remediate one another. These processes of change can be understood as an aesthetic condition of creation, e.g. striving towards developing the artistic medium of a particular art form. It can be viewed as a commercial endeavour or condition of storytelling across media channels, as in the notion of transmedia. In Henry Jenkins' definition, 'a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole' (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 95-96). In its commercial sense, then, a transmedia story across media requires 'a depth of experience that motivates more consumption' (p. 96).

The growth of transmedia as a media phenomenon or strategy for media creation speaks to a larger cultural condition of proliferation of media channels. Today, over 15 years into the age of the World Wide Web, Jay David Bolter speaks of a 'culture of plenitude' (2014) and Lev Manovich argues that we live in an age of 'more media', in which 'the explosion of user-created media content on the web [...] has unleashed a new media universe' in which 'we have moved from *media* to *social media*' (2009, p. 319; emphasis in original). The proliferation of media forms and devices and the inclusion of user-generated content and social media sharing suggest an increasingly complex media landscape, and consequently equally complex patterns of media consumption. Strategies of media use that we are learning through new digital technologies form habits. In part, these borrow from habits of using machines and media interfaces that we are already familiar with (turning the pages of a book become swiping an image of a book page to come to the next screen, also in the image of a book page). Some of these interface interactions will inevitably 'spill over' from one medium to another, becoming an expectation of interaction, for instance trying to swipe across the screen of your laptop or desktop computer screen as if you were still interacting with your touch interface smartphone or tablet.

In a comparative ethnography of Filipino and Caribbean transnational families Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller found that media use in everyday life is more reliant on social, emotional and, at times, moral consequences of choosing between media rather than just the technical constraints imposed by each individual medium (2012). Put differently, once the preconditions for an environment of communication possibilities are met – access, affordability and media literacy – technologies are 'socialised' into complex socio-technological relations in which interpersonal relationships are enacted and experienced. Their study showed the highly personal

negotiations of media choice of users in which communication technologies were perceived in an integrated structure of different media, even though they were not designed or conceived of as complementary. The observations include users who communicated with certain family members using only email, while with others they would choose Facebook chats, video Skype etc. Madianou and Miller conclude that in interpersonal communication the media choices the users made pointed to sophisticated strategies, or what they call polymedia (2012). As a correlate to their study, I would suggest that media use in everyday life is also reliant on sensory, proprioceptive dimensions – what device do I want to watch a film on in a particular situation? Do I want to lie in bed with a smartphone or an iPad in my hands, or sit somewhere with a laptop in front of me, or in the sofa with the TV on? The key point is choice.

If we accept the notion that overall digital culture proliferates across and permeates all kinds of social sectors, countries, cultures and languages, and that we are becoming sophisticated users who choose discerningly among the various tools and platforms at our disposal, can we then have a unified understanding of the aesthetics of digital cultural objects? The notion of a plenitude speaks against such generalisable and shared notions of aesthetic apprehension and ideals. This is where the term polyaesthetics comes in.[3]

This article takes part in the ongoing reconfiguration of an 'aesthetics' for contemporary digital culture, in which the definition of aesthetics both expands on and shifts away from historically prevalent definitions. Naturally, the prefix *poly-* suggests many, plentiful. In invoking poly-*aesthetics*, I return to the original Greek sense of *aisthesis* as the perception of the world through the senses, not just of particular classes of objects (Chappell, 2013). The complex history of defining aesthetics can be outlined along intersecting themes: sensory perception, beauty and similar concepts of taste such as the sublime, and art (Shusterman, 2000). The philosophy of aesthetics as theories of judgement, taste and beauty (specifically Kant) links to the narrower domain of a philosophy of art, understood as engendering a distinctive and particular form of experience. The idea of the aesthetic as a general mode of human perception and experience took a back seat in favour of the special experience of art as the dominant understanding of aesthetics since Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's realignment of the concept (Guyer, 2014). However, the notion of aesthetics as perception and experience beyond art never completely left the field of aesthetic theory.

I align myself with philosophers and scholars who follow a pragmatist aesthetics that has grown in importance in recent decades. In the 1930s the American pragmatist John Dewey sought to redefine an aesthetic experience as one connected to events in everyday life. The aesthetic, for Dewey, was to be found in the 'rush and flow of everyday sensory experiences', a 'heightened vitality' in seemingly mundane

or undervalued experiences (2005, p. 18). Dewey describes experience as 'the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication' (p. 22). Dewey was writing in 1934, observing a very different world than ours, which is noticeable from his examples. Scholars have continued the increasingly influential shift in the understanding of aesthetics away from the study of privileged art forms, foregrounding our experiences with everyday objects and situations. The scenes that Dewey describes are primarily of objects or natural and social events and surroundings, not of engaging with media forms. His aesthetic theory has been important, however, beyond philosophy.

In interaction design, Peter Wright, John McCarthy and Paul Dourish, among others, have conceptualised an aesthetics of human-computer interaction and interaction design based in a pragmatic account of human everyday experience (McCarthy & Wright, 2004; Wright, Wallance & McCarthy, 2008; Dourish, 2004). Wright and McCarthy articulate aesthetic experience as a process in which intellectual, sensual and emotional dimensions carry equal value, and, invoking the philosophy of Dewey, they view experience as a dynamic interrelationship between people and environments, a relationship which is continuously evolving and changing. Since the field is interaction design, the experience that interest Wright and McCarthy is 'an engagement of a concerned, feeling, self acting with and through materials and tools' (Wright, Wallace & McCarthy, 2008, p. 18:6). This realisation underlies the main tenets of Jonas Löwgren's call for interaction designers to pay attention to what some of these aesthetic experiences do. He suggests that an attention to aesthetics (which he too understands in a dual sense: as a Deweyan sense of perception and as beauty) can help designers create what he calls pliable, fluid and rhythmic interaction (2009). These interaction design scholars foreground the perceptual and experiential qualities of aesthetic experience that emerge in the performance of the interaction that has been designed.

In addition to the perceptual understanding of aesthetics, polyaesthetics describes the multiplicity of media and communication channels and devices that we have at our disposal on a day-to-day basis, as well as the hybrid, or to use Madianou and Miller's term, polymedia strategies and experiences which we encounter in our technologised everyday life. Polyaesthetics is therefore also a shift from the notion of the unified whole, the synaesthetic that Marshall McLuhan foregrounded, to the multiple and hypermediated. McLuhan's synaesthesia implicated an 'interplay of senses' (2010, p. 342), a joining of senses into a unified experience. I would argue that synaesthesia does not fully describe the contemporary media landscape which, counter to McLuhan's ideas about synaesthetic media, in particular television, does not make up a coherent whole. Digital media are not situated in one shared cultural hierarchy or value system. Rather, our current media moment

forms a constantly fluid and changing patchwork of communities with their own logics of media values.

Let me use an example from what Michael Bull has called iPod culture:

> iPod culture [...] concerns the seamless joining together of experience in a flow, unifying the complex, contradictory and contingent nature of the world beyond the user. The success of these aestheticizing strategies depends upon the creation of an all-enveloping wall of sound through which the user looks (Bull, 2012, pp. 198-199).

The scene that Michael Bull describes is becoming increasingly common, and we are many who readily and often engage in similar 'aestheticizing strategies', whether those include putting soundtracks to our lives that others cannot hear, or keeping track and documenting what happens to us through photographs and videos, or other data about our daily lives, which are then often shared via social media. The strategies that Bull describes as intrinsically individual are of course employed by many people, creating a tension between a highly individual media act and the fact that many others are doing the same thing. Each individual sets up a mediated space shaped by the technologies and services they use, the choices they make, their own particular set of devices, software, songs, sounds, videos, links to Spotify playlists and the like that they may then share with others, even co-develop and listen to simultaneously. The result of looking at an iPod culture linked to contemporary social media is not one of isolation and distance; instead, the picture that emerges is one of everyday life as shared mixed media experience. The strategies of aestheticising everyday media life today are multiple, complex and, at once, co-dependent and separated. Bull's description of the individual iPod user in his or her bubble of sound is correct in identifying a unified sonic space; what interests me, however, is the citizenry of a whole host of groups and communities engaging in both individual and social activities across the contemporary moment of digital culture.

The digital objects I analyse in this article are not trailblazing examples, even though they are at the forefront of exploring digital remediations of their individual genres; neither do they belong to art communities invested in the vestiges of the twentieth-century avant-garde and its formal and political agendas. In a digital media community such as the one forming around born-digital, or electronic literature, works tend to borrow much of their aesthetic ideals from the early avant-garde;[4] in other communities quite different ideas about media work and influences are at play. The *Lessmore* iPad app (and the animated film) borrows its visual language from children's books, films and educational games. Therefore, an analysis of its aesthetics should not only take a set of technical or physical essences about the digital medium or the touch device as its main guide for how to interpret the experience.

The question for the researcher as well as the regular user becomes: How do we understand the artefacts and experiences that we are faced with, if they do not adhere to our understanding of cultural genres (literature, film, games and so forth), nor can be reduced to the characteristics of digital computing? Within digital media theory one can find strong advocacy for the notion that a correct understanding of the basic principles of digital computing should be the basis for any analysis or conceptualisation of a product of digital media. For instance, procedurality and simulation are viewed as important organising principles for the architectural set-up and computational and aesthetic logics of digital media genres such as games (Bogost, 2007). The theorisation of the computer as a medium with unifying and defining material properties (Manovich, 2001; Murray, 1997 are key early examples) is part of the picture. However, as Bogost's discussion on the procedural rhetoric of video games suggests, generalisable principles for the consumption and reception of digital media objects usually fail to provide much insight over time as technologies change. Aesthetic and media-driven strategies therefore intermingle with technological and code-specific properties, and are contingent upon the time and context.

Many digital media experiences today are already set up as potentially multiple, add-on-ready and social media-plugged. These incremental changes to media objects and events put pressures on our genre names and definitions. One consequence of the polyaesthetic condition is the uncertainty that arises when one tries to define or name the genre of these apps. Depending on your point of view, this process of naming can cause nervousness or exhilaration. The thwarted attempts to name or make meaning on the basis of genre expectations often echo other anxieties: the loss of cultural or theoretical privilege for instance (Eisenstein, 1995). In some contexts, for instance with Steve Tomasula's multimodal digital novel *TOC* (2009), I have suggested that many of these newer, hybrid digital objects bring about a tension between a sense of nostalgia for the older medium and an anxiety in the presence of what Søren Kierkegaard would call the 'dizziness of freedom' when faced with the abyss of possibilities in the face of change (as cited in McCarthy, 1985, pp. 106-107). Some scholars argue that the digitalisation of books has spawned a renewed interest in the material potential of the printed book, or what Jessica Pressman has celebrated as an 'aesthetics of bookishness' (2009), evidence of a dynamic and changing moment for text (Striphas, 2009; Eisenstein, 1995); others lament the loss of cultural dominance and well-known patterns of reading that DenHoed alludes to (see e.g. Carr, 2010). The evocation of a polyaesthetic condition in media today reflects a cultural climate in which aesthetic hierarchies are challenged, changed and, in some cases, dismantled altogether.

The anxiety regarding one medium changing or becoming increasingly obsolete in favour of another, such as the importance of print as the medium of knowl-

edge (through book reading), is a commonly occurring part of media technological change, one that we can observe in most if not all major media technological shifts since at least the invention of print (Bolter, 2001). In my definition of the polyaesthetic I mean to suggest no value judgement regarding cultural value. In the midst of another profound shift in human technological change – computerisation – the kinds of media experiments that we see in the works that I analyse below have become possible.

The Fantastic Flying Books: remediating production

The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore (*Lessmore*) started life as an animated short film. It won an Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 2011. The animation uses computer animation, stop motion photography, miniatures and hand-drawn images, voice narration and sounds. It tells the story of Mr Morris Lessmore, a bookish man who after a storm winds up stranded in a library where he becomes the custodian of its books. The books require nurture, food and attention (as one would expect from animated books who have come alive). Mr Lessmore takes care of them while also writing his own memoirs. At the end, as an old man, Morris has finished his writing, and so he closes the book and leaves. He is rewarded with youth, returning to the world he once left. The story ends with a young girl coming to the library. She starts reading Morris' book and we are left with the promise of a new custodian of the dependent and somewhat unruly tomes of the library. In this context, *Lessmore* serves as an example of how stories that are produced across several media involve aesthetic and narrative choices that relate to the proliferation of products and genres in the contemporary media landscape, but it also points to the continuous exploration of form that those choices lead to.

Lessmore could be seen as a straightforward adaptation of the animated film into a multimodal game-like reading app, part of a transmedia chain of products that also includes a picture book released in print and e-versions as well as an Augmented Reality application that augments the printed pages with multimedia.[5] However, upon closer inspection, the relation of the individual components to the whole experience involved asking larger questions about the current cultural status of the other media forms in the chain. The directors of the film, William Joyce and Brandon Oldenburg, chose to create an interactive app for touch screen devices (Moonbot Studios LA, 2012), a choice which was not without anxiety, as they explain: 'We're doing a short film that celebrates books and speaks to their preciousness and [...] that they're endangered [...] This is a transitional time for printed media. There was some trepidation about doing the app – we didn't want to kill the thing we love – but at the same time we thought, "This new technology could very well be a way to help save publishing"' (Rome, 2012). The two directors clearly situ-

ate their film and the iPad interactive app as part of a media landscape in which printed books – in particular fiction – are undergoing profound changes, in which they are even threatened as the carriers of human knowledge and stories. At the same time, as film directors, they are clearly invested in other modes of representation of stories. For them, that which can potentially 'save publishing' can be found in the interaction in which images and sounds become linked to the user's gestures which then drive the experience of the app forward. These moves, even when minimal, propel the narrative and the individual moments of interaction or play at the end of each narrative section. While the interactions feel obvious for the most part for a user familiar with the touch interface, and visual cues (arrows) show you what to do if you do not know, the result is a playful and charming story experience. The images, interactions and sounds in *Lessmore* serve a similar illustrative function as the caption does to a news photograph. The flow of the narrative is represented in text, voice and image and sound; these media all work in braided fashion to propel the narrative forward. The diegetic sounds are environmental, giving life to the relative flatness of the visuals in the app: the books whose pages flutter, their voices speaking here and there, the sounds of the wind. The media forms – image, music, text, sound, voice – are distinctly combined into a multimedia object in which the elements serve to complement, compete or mix with the others.

The interaction with *Lessmore* becomes one in which the user simultaneously explores the specific patterns for this particular work. Although gestures and clicks are native to the device itself, the application builds up its own gestural language that the user has to learn. What happens if I touch here, or move the iPad this way? A complex meaning-making feedback loop is created between the user's gestures, the representations in the application and the narrative that is told.

Although envisioned as a parable of books surviving in a digital age, a way to celebrate books as endangered material objects, others saw the transmedia project as a warning against the 'fetishization of books' (DenHoed, 2012). Andrea DenHoed's review in *The New Yorker* suggests that Mr Morris Lessmore retreats into an escapist world of books rather than deal with the aftermath of the storm that has shaken loose the printed word from the page. DenHoed sees an analogy to the pressures of digital books on printed ones, 'shadows of the e-reading experience in the sliding words', and a world 'of decimated, discarded books and disorienting illiteracy' that holds a 'terrifying' lesson for books and book lovers (2012).

For DenHoed, the animated film is a bleak allegory for the late age of print, and *Lessmore* certainly seems to be able to induce anxiety in its audience, particularly critics who were faced with a hybrid media object that pushed at the boundaries of its own genre – namely, animated film – and seemed also to offer commentary on the transformative media culture in which the film, and the topic of the film emerged. Where DenHoed sees something terrifying, I see playfulness and experi-

mentation with storytelling on the part of authors, comparable to other digital narratives, ranging from children's iPad books, e.g. Alice for the iPad (Atomic Antelope, 2010), to experimental digital fiction such as Steve Tomasula's *TOC* (2009). As a polyaesthetic object, *Lessmore*'s media-specific status comes from borrowing freely from other sources – books, films, games – in its quest towards configuring one of several media objects in one narrative world.

Tactile experience and *Upgrade Soul*

If *Lessmore* exemplifies the proliferation of media objects and their status in a larger media landscape, the next example, Erik Loyer's *Upgrade Soul* (2012), foregrounds processes of remediation within one media object. It shows both experimentation on behalf of the authors and exploration of the range of interaction and engagement that is offered to the user/reader. Specifically, the work foregrounds an interplay between sensory input – via interface elements – and the meaning that the user makes. Called an immersive science fiction graphic novel, *Upgrade Soul* is written and illustrated by Ezra Claytan Daniels, with an original soundtrack by Alexis Gideon, and developed by Erik Loyer. *Upgrade Soul* is programmed in the Unity play engine, endowing it with affordances to set up game logics, real-time interaction and panel transitions (rather than recorded ones) as well as the use of 2D and 3D images. *Upgrade Soul* is the story of Hank and Molly Nonnar who have decided to fund research for an experimental therapy to rejuvenate the human body (http://opertoon.com/2012/06/upgrade-soul/). It uses the characteristic minimal animation that has become a hallmark of certain kinds of digital formats: the animated gif (in particular in its cinemagraph and stereograph versions), the motion comic (Watchmen 2008 is a prime example)[6] and, since the wider adoption of HTML5 and CSS3, experiments with multimodal journalistic writing, such as the Pulitzer Prize winning multimodal essay 'Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek' by John Branch (2012). *Upgrade Soul* is a paid app which you buy in instalments. Chapters are sold individually as in-app purchases, a business model that has become a staple in digital media economy. You buy the framework, the app itself with the first chapter, and then each consecutive chapter has to be bought individually or in packets. A mash-up of the traditional feuilleton and the comic book released in issues, complete with a wait between chapter releases, *Upgrade Soul* stretches out the reading experience over time. 18 chapters have been announced; at the time of writing eight chapters have been released.[7]

Although it is easy to pay attention to the newness of the visual dimensions – the interplay between still and moving image, between gesture and visual effect on the screen – sounds are central to the overall experience. The dynamic musical score and sounds in *Upgrade Soul* follow the reading patterns of the user as he or she

interacts with the panels. In *Lessmore* the ebb and flow of listening to the narrator is interspersed with moments of interaction, play even (the display of text in addition to the narrator track is available but optional). The moments of interaction in both *Lessmore* and *Upgrade Soul* along with all the different media create a space in which we can linger or hastily rush through, but which we nevertheless are not meant to ignore.[8]

In *Upgrade Soul* the tactile interface and animations along with the sounds set the stage for a familiar, yet not quite comfortable reading experience. *Upgrade Soul*'s sounds range from the illustrative, as in *Lessmore*, to the narrative, when sounds carry the narrative rather than merely provide illustration to the written story. The soundtrack creates an eerie atmosphere with sudden shifts or breaks at crucial narrative moments. These shifts are triggered as direct responses to the user's touch. The sounds of *Upgrade Soul* both trigger and are triggered by the animation and flow of the panels and, thereby, the reading.[9]

It is clear that the makers of *Upgrade Soul* are exploring new forms and experiences, integrating elements from different genres. A rather complex interplay of senses are called upon to make a hybrid genre. The authors make a stance against genre placement of their work into only one genre with one set of interaction:

> Games, comics, and music: these are a few of our favorite things, and our everyday devices' new-found abilities to sense touch, gesture, and motion can be used to fuse those arts into a fresh take on storytelling, one that's as rich and emotional as we've come to expect from other media, yet invigorated by possibilities unique to interactivity [...] we know the kind of experiences we want to play: interactive entertainment that's fun, engaging, and emotional, that doesn't punish us with steadily increasing difficulty or overly complex controls (Opertoon, 2013).

As their description shows, the combination of different kinds of engagement, of combining genres, and sensory experiences is at the heart of *Upgrade Soul*'s aesthetics. Likewise the work moves away from a game play that foregrounds level-play, win-lose game states, or multiple interaction modes, which the makers hint at: 'interactive entertainment [...] that doesn't punish us with steadily increasing difficulty or overly complex controls' (Opertoon, 2013). Instead, their work explores the contours of an experience that strives towards immersion (in the sense of making the interactions of the medium naturalised) while also relying on hybridity, or hypermediacy (in Bolter and Grusin's sense) of foregrounding the media and the actions required for the experience.

Both *Upgrade Soul* and *Lessmore* rely on the integration, indeed the 'interplay of senses' to make meaning, to forge a relationship with its user. A user, for lack of a better term, who is called upon to engage in practices such as reading, listening, playing, touching and, beyond the immediate experience of the work itself, buying, installing and sharing. Points on a spectrum, the two works function as experi-

ments. In French, the word *expérience* has two meanings: an experience or a (scientific) experiment. In all their facets, the iPad apps set up *experiences* that function as *experiments*. It is in this sense of experience and experiment that the creators and the audience can test – in practice – certain ideas about the qualities, shapes and assumptions of media culture today. The works also test the affordances of new multimodal technologies juxtaposed with the already formed media habits of the user and his or her willingness or reluctance to venture into a new experience. This media event makes up the experiment, and constitutes a forging of a polyaesthetic relationship. In this context, then, the polyaesthetic serves to foreground the multiplicity in reception. The experiences of the two applications as I have described them, then, serve as examples of a larger and inescapable connection between particular applications and their situated, mediated events, or in Hayles' terms 'the dynamic interactions between physical characteristics and signifying strategies' (2005, p. 3), to the whole range of everyday media practices that Manovich, Bull, and Madianou and Miller foreground.[10]

As a remediated graphic novel, *Upgrade Soul* busts through the seams of the definitions of graphic novel as a printed form by way of its digital tactile interface, while still connecting recognisably to graphic novels as a genre. Put differently, the media condition for *Upgrade Soul* as a graphic novel has moved beyond the text-and-image panel construction of a printed graphic novel, while simultaneously relying on a remediation of the aesthetic language of the comic: the panels, the movement from one set of panels to the next and the expressive styles of drawn characters (see McCloud, 1993; Carrier, 2000). The importance of the interface and its projected interactions push the aesthetic of the work into a polyaesthetic condition in which the combinations are contextual, not a general effect of the digital medium having particular essential qualities.

'The Vampyre of Time and Memory', or how to walk through a music video

The third and final example ties together the two sides of the polyaesthetic that I have outlined: the motley juxtaposition of genres, influences and media forms into experimental forms, and, secondly, the subsequent (or connected) multisensory mode of engagement that such media objects rely on for meaning-making. When American band Queens of the Stone Age (QOTSA) released their song 'The Vampyre of Time and Memory' (Homme, 2013), it included a music video, published online on YouTube (Arens & Trucco, 2013) and an interactive music video on the web (Arens, Trucco, & Darknet, 2013). The interactive music video is set up as a two-dimensional room in which the user can explore three 'sets' (two videos of the band and one with singer Dolly Boyd, performing the song), the room itself and the various interactive

elements within it: a pop-up graphic with the song lyrics and links to iTunes to buy the album (*... Like Clockwork*), Kii Arens's website for sale of his artwork and the You-Tube version of the video. All the while the song is playing and the experience is contained within the time of the song. The interactive music video is made exclusively in HTML5 and bears some of the hallmarks of HTML5 and CSS3 interactive and dynamic functions.[11] The interactive space uses transparent ghostly images that appear and disappear, the illusion of spatial sound and a seamless shift between the video clips and the images of the room to suggest to the user that he or she is not only listening to a song but has entered a multimedia music space. The effect is one of a burlesque and distinct space, indicative of the style that QOTSA wants to associate with the music. Although the work can be described as multimedia or rich media in its use of several media forms, such terms say little about its aesthetic gestures or intended use. 'Vampyre' is neither a *Gesamtkunstwerk* under one strong authorial ideal and unified vision, nor Fluxus anti-art, anti-commercial intermedia. Rather, the work is clearly complicit with commercial interests in the music and film industry, and it is not situated as a work within an art world context.[12]

It is an example of what I call contemporary polyaesthetics, a motley mix of aesthetic influences, commerce and music. The work does not bother with strong distinctions between the artwork 'itself' and the paraphernalia and merchandise surrounding it. At its core, the interactive work online meshes the various elements of contemporary music industry: the music, the music video, the selling of the music in some form or another (whether as computer files or on recording media such as a CD or vinyl), merchandise connected to the band and the album, and the fashioning of the artists as possibly iconic figures.

In terms of interaction or modes of reception the interactive video offers the user a blended experience of listening and watching, of navigating a virtual room filled with linked objects, as well as the choice to 'walk up to' and peak in on the videos that are played in parts of the space. By way of an interactive multimedia web space – configured visually and through interaction as a room – the user is invited to temporally juxtapose several actions: listening to the music and watching a video, then watching a second video to the same music, browsing and buying merchandise and music, and reading the lyrics as he or she listens to the song. There is a level of interaction that introduces a minimal sense of remix. By navigating between the sections of the room, the user can interrupt the flow of the video, performing his or her own cuts between the three videos that are on display, while the music plays on. While this may be a limited creative act, it nevertheless introduces a choice into what is otherwise a one-way consumption pattern. This choice offers a more tactile and spatial experience than watching the more traditionally constructed music video on YouTube, stopping short of introducing actual game-like elements.

The interactive experience of 'Vampyre' is similar, I would argue, to what Michael Bull has described as the multisensory engagement (or disengagement) by iPod and smartphone users with urban space, a media use which involves a 'rich and competing mix of sound, touch and vision' (2013, p. 31). Bull speaks specifically about the use of smartphones and similar mobile devices in urban environments, but this multisensory engagement reaches beyond the use of a particular technology. It is permeating contemporary media consumption patterns. As Bull notes, 'The sensory mix embodied in the progressive use of a wide range of media technologies from the radio; television, the Internet and the mobile phone involve multiple sensory configurations' (p. 27). Directors Kii Arens and Jason Trucco describe their experiment in the following way: 'All art is technology, technology that shares an experience or an idea. "Vampyre" uses all the tools available to use today to share a meaningful common experience' (Sokol, 2013). I would suggest that the common experience is in fact undermined by each individual's own media combinations and interactions with the interactive video site (along with whatever else he or she is doing on the device at the time, which is also vying for his or her attention).

The push for the user's attention comes in a final promise of added personalised content in the interactive video's cannibalistic spillover onto Facebook. If one installs the QOTSA Chrome extension, it opens up your Facebook page. Once there, it starts to play the music. The extension becomes an adaptation infecting my social media page, a video taking the place of the banner image, the lyrics played out as FB status updates. At the end it renders an image which is 'my' snapshot of the event that just unfolded in my browser; we are far from MTV music videos of the 1980s and 1990s. The directors' use of 'art' suggests that they view the experience as an aesthetic one; not one that stays within the expectations of a particular style or genre, but rather a technological one that they have crafted by using 'all the tools available today'.

The challenge of understanding media forms – sights and sounds, touches and movements – in contemporary media cultures is then a challenge of understanding how any media form configures mediated experiences that draw upon human perceptual registers – our senses – and that also build upon existing media strategies and aesthetic and stylistic traditions (such as remix, collage, montage, mash-ups etc.) that foreground multiplicity. It is not that we now suddenly apprehend the world we live in, including the digital media technologies that we share that world with, with more senses than before. Rather, the current aesthetic condition in digital media often foregrounds multimodal composition and multisensory reception through technical and aesthetic properties. The description of our media experiences and engagement as polyaesthetic is less concerned with media essences and formal categories, and more focused on the challenges of addressing how we perceive the world, the media world, in which we live, and how our own media strate-

gies, expectations and creative acts – as makers and users – play into elucidating those experiences.

This article has argued that we need a new conception of aesthetics that combines the notion of aesthetics as sensory reception and as a creative strategy for creating media objects in order to deal with today's media culture. Aesthetics as a concept should be reconfigured rather than replaced by terms that focus exclusively on media (transmedia, multimedia etc.) for two reasons: first, to counter notions of aesthetics that inevitably link to art and assume a special function of art, and, secondly, to link sensory reception to the notion of aesthetic experience without privileging particular senses or combinations of senses. Inherent in such configurations of art is the evocation of hierarchies. So, in the case of newer media forms, the only recourse for a new medium to become an art form is to 'fight' for legitimacy or 'elevation' according to a scale that is increasingly decentred.[13] Dewey and McLuhan in their own ways were beginning to democratise the concept of aesthetics. In today's plenitude and shifting technological realities we need to describe the aesthetic experience in and through all sorts of media forms rather than try to define what those media forms are as stable constructs. Provisional forms, forms produced by all sorts of people with all sorts of skills and motivations, popular forms, mass media forms broadcast through established networks, established media forms that already have institutional structures, esoteric forms outside such structures, occasional forms, constellations of media that are ad hoc without having an avant-garde purpose, and so on. To understand aesthetics as polyaesthetics is radical only if it is understood as the aesthetics of a digital culture where art is just another practice by a particular community among many that configure and reconfigure our experiences. As communities these groups are certainly defined by socioeconomic realities, institutional support or lack thereof, traditions and shared categories of judgement and value. However, their relationship with other groups should no longer be understood as unified in a shared hierarchy. The works that I have analysed above show facets in emergent practices that underscore that shift, although in this article I focused on changing aesthetic definitions. The point simply is that aesthetics no longer works as a category for understanding digital culture, unless it is defined as polyvalent, multiple and utterly without hierarchical significance.

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Notes

1   This article was first presented as a paper at the Literature, Media, Sound conference at Aarhus University November 29, 2013 (http://conferences.au.dk/literaturemediasound/). I would like to thank the organisers, Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen and Iben Have, for their constructive comments on my presentation and continued support. I thank the participants at the conference, in particular Jørgen Bruhn and Søren Pold for questions and suggestions. I also thank the two anonymous journal reviewers for constructive feedback. Finally, many thanks to Jay David Bolter for, as always, incisive and honest critique of my work.

2   Just by way of using the term 'user' to indicate a consumer of media products one relates the changed status of the activities and interactions that media use today can offer.

3   Polyaesthetics also borrows from a defunct medical term: polyaesthesia. The medical condition that the term polyaesthesia, or tactile polyaesthesia, referred to was understood as a somatosensory disorder in which a single tactile stimulus was felt in several parts of the human body (Schilder, 2013, p. 18; Catani & Thiebaut de Schotten, 2012, p. 67). By contrast, the medical definition of synaesthesia is a blending of senses, in which perceptual experience through one sense evokes a response in a different sense, such as relating colours with taste (Catani & Thiebaut de Schotten, 2012, pp. 308-309).

4   This international community has a few key centres of activity, among them the Electronic Literature Organization which has overseen the development of information databases, anthologies and conferences on electronic literature (http://eliterature.org); the ELMCIP Knowledge Base which was part of the ELMCIP research project (http://elmcip.net). For more on digital literature in relation to the avant-garde see Engberg & Bolter, 2011.

5   A video description of the AR application IMAG·N·O·TRON can be found here: http://vimeo.com/56105630.

6   The motion comic is based on the comic book series *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and David Gibbons (1986). The motion comic series was directed by Jake Strider Hughes and produced by Wesley Coller (2008-2009; Cruel and Unusual Films, US).

7   The work has won prizes both for graphic novels and for games, further signalling the integration or slippages between genres.

8   Although the option to read by choosing only chapters is available in *Lessmore.* Such a reading, however, would make it less of a game that includes a game logic in which one level has to be completed before the next can be entered.

9   For lack of a better term, reading here has to be understood as comprising the entire multi-modal – polyaesthetic – experience: listening, reading, touching, moving the device etc.

10   Although this article deals primarily with Western examples, digital media cultures permeate even countries that are otherwise considered to be lower on the scale of industrial development. Research has shown that in African countries mobile phone access is far outnumbering access to desktop computing (Smith, 2014); and, today mobile phones – including smartphones – are changing sub-Saharan politics, media, business and society (Hersman, 2013).

11   HTML5 allows for new capabilities to create interactive web spaces. At the moment of writing, the Chrome web browser handles these capabilities the best, which the QOTSA video and other earlier examples show, such as Chris Milk's Wilderness Downtown (2010, http://www.thewildernessdowntown.com/).

12   I borrow the notion of 'art world' from Howard Becker's 1982 study *Art Worlds* that situates art as an activity that happens in cooperations. Art 'happens' through complex cooperative networks that include, for instance, the manufacturing of the material and equipment that an artwork requires, and many other activities that might otherwise be viewed as support, or not as intrinsic to the artwork as those with more clearly aesthetic characteristics.

13   An example of this rhetoric move is the debate around video games as an art form (Ochalla, 2007).