Narrating Through Interfaces: Simulation, Amplification and Immersion in How to Rob a Bank

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Abstract

Digital literature, characterized by its multimodality and intertextuality, challenges traditional notions of textuality and narrative. Evolving from early hypertext fiction into diverse forms such as interactive drama, flash poetry, and social media-based storytelling, it reflects shifting media ecologies and reading practices. This paper examines Alan Bigelow's How to Rob a Bank (2016) through the lens of Simon Rowberry's The Rise of Electronic Literature (2018), with particular attention to three interrelated concepts: simulation, amplification, and immersion. Bigelow's work simulates the everyday experience of navigating digital interfaces, Google, Instagram, text messages, mirroring how contemporary users engage with media. The narrative's multimodal structure amplifies its thematic content by embedding it within the logic of networked life, where identity and action unfold through screens and code. Finally, the piece fosters immersion not by mimicking reality but by reflecting our intimate familiarity with digital environments. In doing so, it highlights how electronic literature can leverage media conventions to tell stories that are both experientially and formally distinct from print-based works. The paper argues that How to Rob a Bank not only exemplifies current trends in digital literature but also invites broader reflection on how we consume, construct, and interpret narrative in the digital age.

Keywords: digital literature, simulation, amplification, immersion, Rowberry, Bigelow

Introduction

You are not just reading anymore, you are tapping, swiping, scrolling, zooming, and sometimes even talking to your text. Digital literature has changed the way we think about reading and storytelling. It's not just paragraphs on a page anymore; it's swipes, searches, notifications,

and visual cues. Stories show up as text messages, social media feeds, and fake apps. They don't just tell; they simulate. And a lot of the time, they look like the digital interfaces we already spend hours staring at.

Alan Bigelow's How to Rob a Bank (2016) taps directly into that. The story unfolds through a series of smartphone interactions: Google, Instagram, bank apps, and call logs. You don't read it so much as you move through it. You become part of the rhythm of someone else's screen time. It's a narrative that mimics how we live, jumping from app to app, always multitasking, half-watching, and half-performing.

As Simon Rowberry notes in The Rise of Electronic Literature (2018), digital literature is not simply a new mode of storytelling, it is a systemic reorganization of literary practice itself, often marked by characteristics such as simulation, amplification, and immersion. These traits do not merely function as stylistic flourishes but are deeply entwined with the logic of digital environments and the cultures they sustain. They foreground literature not as a passive reading experience but as an interactive, participatory, and often gamified process, calling attention to the material conditions of reading and meaning making in a digital age.

Digital Fiction

Digital fiction refers to narrative works created specifically for and read on screens, which leverage the affordances of the digital medium to pursue verbal, visual, and conceptual complexity. The materiality of literature undergoes a significant transformation when digital technology is employed for aesthetic purposes. What was once confined to ink and paper becomes an interactive object that engages the reader's senses, simulating a multimodal experience that fosters immersion and sustained engagement. Importantly, if such texts are removed from their digital medium, they lose not only their interactive affordances but also a significant part of their semiotic and aesthetic function.

The Digital Fiction International Network defines digital fiction as "fiction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium" (Bell et al., 2010). This framing situates digital fiction as a medium-dependent form in which structure, form, and meaning are intricately bound to the context and platform of its creation and consumption.

According to Rowberry (2018), digital fiction is "dynamic, innovative and multimodal: an evolution from print" (p. 2). N. Katherine Hayles (2008) argues that digital literature often positions itself in opposition to print literature, which in turn complicates its analysis within traditional literary frameworks. Rowberry maintains that media specificity is essential in approaching digital texts, as it recognizes their material distinctiveness

without defaulting to the assumption that they are either superior or inferior to print literature.

Wardrip-Fruin (2010) draws attention to the shared boundaries between digital art and digital literature. While literature operates primarily through linguistic signs, digital art may incorporate a wider range of semiotic resources. Nonetheless, digital literature encompasses a broad variety of platforms, including mobile apps, installations, projections, and web-based interfaces. It varies dramatically in length, extending from a single tweet to millions of lines of code (Rowberry, 2018, p. 3). Through this diversity, digital literature simulates and amplifies the characteristics of other media. The computer, as Rowberry notes, is "designed to simulate other media," and it excels in doing so (2018, p. 6). It does not merely replicate but also extends the formal and aesthetic principles embedded in print, film, visual arts, and games. For Rowberry, simulation and amplification are core to understanding the relationship between digital and traditional literature.

Simulation

With the transition of fiction from the physical to the digital realm, simulation has become a fundamental component of digital literature, aligning closely with the computational logic of the medium. Rowberry (2018) emphasizes that simulation is essential to the ontology of the computer, highlighting its role in reproducing, modeling, and expanding upon other media forms (p. 6). Wardrip-Fruin (2009) similarly describes the computer as a machine constructed specifically to simulate other machines (p. 1).

Bogost (2008) defines simulation as "the gap between the rule-based representation of a source system and a user's subjectivity" (p. 107). In this view, simulation is not merely an act of imitation or replication; it constructs a distinct mode of engagement. Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, and Kelly (2009) affirm this stance by noting that a simulation is "certainly artificial, synthetic and fabricated, but it is not 'false' or 'illusory'" (p. 38). The processes of synthesis and fabrication are themselves real, producing objects that possess a reality of their own. A video game world, for instance, exists independently of whether it mimics an actual location or refers to real entities. Simulations thus shift focus from representing reality to constructing new, experienceable realities.

Because digital fiction often adopts interactive and systemic frameworks similar to video games, the theoretical tools used to understand game simulations are useful in interpreting digital narratives. Lister et al. (2009) draw a distinction between "simulation as media form," which is based on complex spatio-temporal systems, and the "narrative or representational basis of other, longer-established, media" (p. 42). While both simulations and narratives share certain formal elements such as characters, settings, and events their underlying mechanics are distinct. As

Frasca (2003) notes, simulations offer rhetorical possibilities that are not available to traditional narratives, since they model systems rather than simply recount events (p. 222).

Frasca (2003) further suggests that simulations in media serve as tools for modeling complex systems. Although such simulations are not exclusive to digital media, the computational environment provides unique processing capabilities that make them highly effective. The "simulational character of the computer" (Lister et al., 2009, p. 42) establishes video games and digital fiction as hybrid cultural forms, combining elements from computer science, media theory, and semiotics.

In this context, the features of simulation in digital fiction can be analyzed in terms similar to those used in game studies. According to Lister et al. (2009), simulations are:

- "Productive of reality," where objects within the simulation appear natural but are in fact interfaces to a database and controlled by algorithms;

- Mathematically structured and dynamically rendered within unique spatial and temporal environments;

- Constructed through virtual forces and systemic relationships that evolve over time;

- Dependent on the user not merely for interaction but for ontological activation, whereby the simulated world comes into being through a "semiotic or cybernetic circuit" (p. 43).

Simulations are therefore not illusions but real phenomena that are experienced within and augment the real world. Crucially, not all simulations imitate pre-existing realities. Many are autonomous entities that should be interpreted as independent constructs rather than as referential stand-ins.

Amplification

Having established that simulation does not merely imitate reality, Rowberry (2018) extends this idea, arguing that simulation does not replace the original or the real but instead amplifies our understanding of reality (p. 6). This amplification central to digital fiction arises through heightened interactivity and engagement. Like a videogame, digital fiction allows users to influence the course of a narrative through interactive choices (Rowberry, 2018, p. 7). However, this interaction is not confined to a keyboard or touchscreen. It encompasses the reader's emotional investment, agency, and sense of presence within the narrative. By choosing different narrative paths or engaging with alternate media layers, users are drawn deeper into the story world. Even in instances where the reader does not overtly control the narrative's direction, they still contribute to shaping the textual ambiance through their interpretative presence and affective response.

Ciccoricco (2007) emphasizes that analyses of digital fiction must account for the manipulation of "narrative discourse, formal structure, and visual design" as integral aspects of textual perspective (p. 41). Visual and aural elements function as semiotic channels, intensifying the focalization that the text orchestrates. As Page (2008) notes, the integration of sound and image amplifies verbal focalization by engaging the reader's corporeal and psychological responses. These additional modalities, which may align with, contradict, or complicate the narrative, draw attention to the reader/player's immersive and interpretative position within the text (Page, 2008, p. 42). Such layering of media deepens the narrative experience and amplifies affective and cognitive engagement.

While Rowberry (2018) foregrounds simulation and amplification as the defining features of digital literature, critics such as Ryan (2001), Esslin, and Murray (1997) argue that **immersion** is equally crucial. These theorists contend that digital fiction achieves a comprehensive literary effect by enveloping the reader/player in an all encompassing experiential world something that traditional literary forms, with their more fixed boundaries, may not easily achieve. Therefore, any comprehensive theoretical account of digital fiction must also consider immersion as a fundamental mechanism of engagement.

Immersion

Immersion is a much-contested and multifaceted concept, frequently redefined in relation to different media forms and narrative contexts. Early theorists proposed that immersion entails a fully absorbing experience across media types (Murray, 1997). However, given the wide array of contemporary medial experiences, scholars now stress the **medium-specific nature** of immersion (Bell et al., 2018, p. 2). Since the late 1990s, immersion has become a focal point of interest in the analysis of digital texts, videogames, and virtual environments. Seminal works such as Hamlet on the Holodeck (Murray, 1997) and Narrative as Virtual Reality (Ryan, 2001, 2015) have played a pivotal role in shaping immersion theory.

Murray (1997) describes immersion as the sensation of being "transported to an elaborately simulated place" (p. 98), while Ryan (2015) conceives of it as a kind of "fictional recentering" in which "consciousness relocates itself to another world … and reorganizes the entire universe of being around [it]" (p. 73). Both theorists frame immersion in terms of metaphorical transportation. However, later scholars challenge this metaphor. Ermi and Mäyrä (2005), Thon (2008), and Calleja (2011) argue that the idea of "being transported" is misleading. Thon (2008), for instance, insists that there is no actual movement or dislocation. Rather, immersion arises from a shift of attention and the construction of "situation models" specific to various parts of the narrative or game (p. 33). This focus on attentional dynamics helps explain how readers or players lose awareness of their physical surroundings

and instead become cognitively and emotionally engaged within the diegetic world (Grimshaw et al., 2011).

Bell et al. (2018) argue that **spatio-temporal immersion** precedes other types of immersion. It constitutes the reader/player's entry point into the narrative, grounding them within the temporal and spatial logic of the digital text (p. 19). Ryan (2001) similarly defines spatio-temporal immersion as "a sense of being present on the scene of the represented events" (p. 122), which closely parallels Thon's (2008) idea of spatial immersion the user's attentional shift into game environments (p. 35).

Thon (2008) also distinguishes **narrative immersion** as "the player's shift of attention to the future development of the story and the characters in it" (p. 40). This closely aligns with Ryan's categories: spatial immersion, or a "response to setting" (2001, p. 86); temporal immersion, or the experience that "keeps readers turning pages or spectators speculating about what will happen next" (p. 100); and emotional immersion, which entails "subjective reaction to characters and judgements of their behaviour…, emotions felt for others…, emotions felt for oneself" (p. 108).

Each of these immersive dimensions contributes to the reader/player's holistic experience of the digital text. Together, they ensure that the user is not merely a passive observer but an active participant emotionally, psychologically, and semiotically in the construction of the story world.

Analysis

Digital literature demands new conceptual frameworks that respond to its layered, multimodal nature. Rowberry (2017) begins by situating the computer not merely as a tool but as a machine with a "strange ontology," emphasizing that it is not designed for a specific task but rather for simulating "the operations of many different types of machines" (p. 10). This flexibility mirrors the nature of digital literature, which often operates by simulating other media. Core Values by Laird, Carpenter's The Gathering Cloud, and Joyce's Twelve Blue demonstrate how digital literature weaves together disparate forms: textual, visual, and navigational. These texts become sites of convergence. In this regard, digital literature becomes a "trading zone," to borrow Peter Galison's term, where distinct media languages interact to create a hybrid form of storytelling. This interplay forms the foundation of digital narrative complexity and opens up interpretative possibilities unavailable in traditional print.

Alan Bigelow's How to Rob a Bank (2016) exemplifies this transmedia convergence. While it recounts a romanticized Bonnie and Clyde-style narrative, it does so through a multiplicity of media, including Google searches, text messages, social media posts, and e-commerce platforms. The result is not just a story about a couple robbing banks but a self-reflexive commentary on the digital ecosystems we inhabit. Kalinov and

Markova (2016) identify this format as transmedia storytelling, one that relies on a "multitude of integrated media channels" (p. 154). Constructed with HTML5, CSS, and JavaScript, the text is optimized for desktops and portable devices (Stojanova et al., 2016, p. 79), underlining its commitment to the digital form both thematically and technically. The multiplicity of digital touchpoints becomes essential to experiencing, not just reading, the text. This layered format reflects and critiques our daily interface with screens and data.

Central to the narrative's propulsion is Google, which functions not merely as a search engine but as a narrative mechanism. The protagonist Ted's first appearance is marked by his typing "how to rob a bank" into Google (Bigelow, 2016), which immediately characterizes him as inexperienced. This not only sets the tone for the plot but also implicates the audience in a familiar act: turning to Google for solutions. Throughout the narrative, Ted and Elizabeth use the search engine for everything from criminal logistics to emotional support. These searches do not merely serve exposition but structure the story's pacing, mood, and psychological depth. For example, Ted's panicked typos "what to do when ribberies go wrong" and "fist way to write a will" reflect his inner turmoil and mark a significant departure from his earlier composure (Bigelow, 2016, Chap. 1). Google becomes a barometer for character psychology and a structural device that advances the plot while immersing the reader in the characters' thought processes.

More than a functional tool, Google fills narrative gaps usually occupied by supporting characters. Acting as a surrogate confidant, advisor, and plot enabler, it plays a role reminiscent of Vladimir Propp's donor figure in folktales. Google equips Ted and Elizabeth with essential "gifts," from tickets and articles to advice, simulating a mentor's role. However, this reliance also problematizes their agency. Their trust in digital platforms reveals a lack of critical literacy and highlights a broader cultural phenomenon: the illusion of security and privacy in digital spaces. The fact that this data could be weaponized against them points to a thematic undercurrent of surveillance capitalism, where dependence on digital systems becomes not only a narrative tool but also a socio-political critique.

Beyond Google, Bigelow integrates an entire constellation of digital platforms that simulate real-world apps to tell the story. Ted's eBay purchase of a water pistol, his Amazon gift for Elizabeth, and his use of Google Maps to locate the Citizen Bank are all embedded into the narrative. Likewise, Elizabeth turns to Calm for meditation, Instant Baby Sleep to soothe her infant, and online articles to salvage her relationship. These digital detours do not function as distractions. They ground the characters within a hyperreal, app-saturated existence. The apps disclose spatial, emotional, and narrative information. Ted's proximity to the bank, the date of the heist, and Elizabeth's postpartum monotony are all inferred through screen-based

interactions. This accumulation of fragmented media simulates our own fragmented attention spans and points to a world where identity, time, and location are mediated almost entirely through digital infrastructure.

Though there is no audio dialogue, How to Rob a Bank remains communicatively rich. Its silence underscores a major theme: the digitization and depersonalization of human interaction. Ted and Elizabeth communicate almost exclusively via text messages. Elizabeth keeps a digital diary for her daughter, while email becomes the medium through which sisters part ways and betrayals unfold. Instagram serves as a space of self-curation for Ted, who adopts the alias "bankrobr." The couple's story culminates in social media debates and newspaper articles. Even institutional voices, such as the police, are heard through the digitized frequency of a radio. These multiple modalities demonstrate how contemporary communication is increasingly textual, asynchronous, and emotionally attenuated. The effect is not just narrative complexity. It is a critique of how intimacy, authority, and identity are all mediated and fragmented by technology.

Rowberry (2017) emphasizes that simulation in digital literature enables readers to access fictional worlds that would otherwise remain unavailable (p. 12). How to Rob a Bank exemplifies this affordance by constructing a world where readers can vicariously experience a life of crime from the safety of their screens. The visuals, though algorithmically generated, simulate real-world environments with persuasive verisimilitude. As Lister et al. (2009) note, digital images are "mathematically structured and determined" (p. 43). Yet they function with sufficient realism to create immersive experiences. Ted's Instagram photos and Elizabeth's FBI profile simulate authenticity, inviting readers to forget their artificial origins. This simulation encourages critical reflection on how easily digital environments can substitute or overwrite our perception of the real.

Even the act of robbing a bank is depicted as a simulation. Ted's preparation, his meticulous Googling, eBay purchases, and use of maps, mirrors the cinematic logic of heist films. The text intentionally echoes tropes from franchises like Mission Impossible or James Bond, rendering Ted's evolution from amateur to criminal mastermind a recognizable, if ironic, trajectory. The appeal lies in the accessibility of the tools. Unlike Ethan Hunt, Ted uses search engines and apps that readers themselves use daily. This creates a participatory illusion where success in criminality appears attainable. The reader becomes complicit in the simulated fantasy. By adopting the aesthetics of simulation, the text critiques how the digital trivializes or gamifies even the most serious of real-world crimes.

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The characters' lives unfold exclusively through digital screens, emphasizing the extent to which identity and experience are now bounded by technology. The simulation becomes an amplification of our collective digital entrapment. In representing this digital totality, How to Rob a Bank not only mirrors but critiques the modern condition.

Although presented as a bank heist story, the narrative functions equally as a psychological and social portrait. Ted is not driven solely by thrill or greed; his motivations are complex and deeply personal. His calculation of a post-retirement budget suggests financial desperation. His moral hesitation prior to his first heist reveals a conflict not easily dismissed. Ted's reliance on apps rather than human beings also signals emotional isolation. He has no confidants and no ethical sounding board beyond digital prompts, revealing a troubling disconnection from community and conscience. His actions are shaped more by algorithmic outputs than by interpersonal relationships. This detachment problematizes any simplistic reading of him as either hero or villain. Instead, it presents a nuanced character caught in a digitized moral vacuum.

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Elizabeth's trajectory offers a parallel but distinct narrative arc. Initially a follower, she eventually becomes reflective and self-aware. Her recordings to Alexandria chart her doubts, fears, and evolving consciousness. Her conflicts with Deborah, her maternal concerns, and her wavering trust in Ted humanize her beyond the archetype of the loyal partner. Her psychological evolution foregrounds issues of mental labor, gendered roles, and postpartum vulnerability. This emotional transparency fosters reader empathy and expands the narrative beyond crime into a story of domesticity, identity, and emotional survival. As Rowberry (2017) observes, digital literature often enhances "emotional investment" through user-centered design (p. 13). The first-person narrative and shifting points of view in Bigelow's work serve precisely this function, deepening affective engagement.

While Rowberry's dual focus on simulation and amplification is insightful, it overlooks a key component of digital literary experience: immersion. Defined by Ryan (2001) as "spatiotemporal and emotional"

placement within the story world (p. 14), immersion is central to Bigelow's narrative design. Spatial immersion is achieved through digital maps, location data, and environmental details such as weather forecasts and hiking trails. Temporal immersion emerges through the suspenseful pacing and police radio cues that keep readers guessing. Emotional immersion, perhaps the most effective, arises from the love story, the betrayals, and the daily struggles depicted through the characters' digital footprints. How to Rob a Bank succeeds in making its audience feel located in time, space, and emotion, all within the limits of a screen.

Despite offering deep immersion, the narrative restricts user interaction. It lacks hypertextual branching or decision-making mechanisms characteristic of interactive fiction. Readers can swipe or click to move forward or backward, but they do not influence the story. This limited interactivity aligns the work more closely with digital cinema than with game-based storytelling. However, this does not diminish the engagement. Physical interaction with the device a tap, a swipe creates a haptic relationship with the text. The act of progressing the story becomes ritualized. It draws attention to the reader's embodied experience and reinforces the fusion of form and content. The story's digital design reflects its themes of mediation, dependency, and disembodied connectivity.

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While Rowberry's dual focus on simulation and amplification is insightful, it overlooks a key component of digital literary experience: immersion. Defined by Ryan (2001) as "spatiotemporal and emotional" placement within the story world (p. 14), immersion is central to Bigelow's

narrative design. Spatial immersion is achieved through digital maps, location data, and environmental details such as weather forecasts and hiking trails. Temporal immersion emerges through the suspenseful pacing and police radio cues that keep readers guessing. Emotional immersion, perhaps the most effective, arises from the love story, the betrayals, and the daily struggles depicted through the characters' digital footprints. How to Rob a Bank succeeds in making its audience feel located in time, space, and emotion, all within the limits of a screen.

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Discussion

What emerges from this analysis is a deeper understanding of how How to Rob a Bank operates as more than just a love story or a satire. It is a digital performance of the systems we live in, simulating not only different media but our psychological and behavioral dependency on them. Rowberry's concept of simulation as the core of digital literature is especially useful here, but it is not enough to stop at simulation. The text does not just mirror media; it reveals how they structure our thinking. The characters rely on Google not only for information but for moral clarity, strategic planning, and emotional support. This is not just a narrative technique; it is a reflection of what Zuboff calls the "instrumentarian power" of platforms that shape human behavior through data feedback loops.

Galison's idea of the "trading zone" becomes more significant when read against this background. The convergence of media in How to Rob a Bank is not only formal, it is epistemological. The story unfolds where different languages of digital culture search engines, GPS, autofill, social media interact and produce meaning. What the narrative exposes is not a postmodern fragmentation but a hyper-structured dependency, where each media platform functions both as a plot device and a character.

One key takeaway is how the text simulates not just media, but the loss of interiority. Ted and Elizabeth do not have private lives beyond the apps that display their thoughts and track their actions. Rowberry argues that simulation and amplification allow readers to explore fictional worlds otherwise unavailable, but here, the fictional world is eerily familiar. The

structure of the narrative mimics the structure of digital life: algorithmic, optimized, surveilled, and emotionally flattened.

Ultimately, Bigelow's work presses readers to confront a larger question: what happens when our lives begin to resemble digital fiction? How to Rob a Bank stages this question without offering easy answers. That ambiguity, between critique and complicity and between narrative and interface, is perhaps its most important contribution to contemporary digital literature.

Conclusion

How to Rob a Bank doesn't just show us how digital life looks but, it calls it out. The story runs entirely on screen-based interactions, and that's the point. It isn't just using Google searches or Instagram posts to move the plot. It's showing how wrapped up our lives are in these platforms, and how they've become part of how we think, act, and even understand who we are. What starts off as a quirky story about a bank heist ends up saying something much bigger about the world we live in.

This isn't just a story about characters doing stuff online. It's about how our digital footprints, our searches, clicks, and messages, aren't just recorded, they're shaping what we do next. That's the part that gets uncomfortable. It ties into broader debates about surveillance and data culture. Ted and Elizabeth might seem like they're in control, but the way the story is structured suggests otherwise. They're caught in systems that watch them, predict them, and even push them in certain directions, just like the rest of us.

So what the piece really does is blur the lines. Between fiction and reality. Between choice and algorithm. It gets under the skin of what it means to live online. And it does so by making the reader part of it, swiping through screens, piecing together the plot, getting pulled in. Bigelow's work isn't just clever digital storytelling. It's a critique of the systems we move through every day, often without thinking. That's what makes it worth paying attention to.

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