

A Starter's Guide to Writing Electronic Literature: Maximizing Audience Engagement for Html5 Works

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Abstract

This is a starter's guide to writing electronic literature. It is written to help budding digital artist to maximizing audience engagement for Html5 e-lit works published on the web. Using HTML5/CSS/JavaScript, writers can use a variety of strategies to help maximize audience engagement in works of digital literature. Hopefully, this guide will help form a base on which beginning digital writers can grow and evolve their practice.

Keywords: HTML5, CSS, JavaScript, React,

Résumé

Cette guide est faite pour débiter la rédaction de la littérature électronique. Elle a pour but de maximiser l'engagement du public pour les œuvres HTML5 de littérature électronique publiées sur le Web. Grâce à HTML5/CSS/JavaScript, les écrivains peuvent utiliser diverses stratégies pour maximiser l'engagement du public dans les œuvres de littérature numérique. Espérons que ce guide contribuera à constituer une base sur laquelle les débutants artistes numériques pourront développer et faire évoluer leur pratique.

Mots-Clés : HTML5, CSS, JavaScript, React

Around 2013, it appeared that FLASH would no longer have long-term support on the web. As a digital writer, I would miss the robustness and flexibility of FLASH but, as a creator, I recognized that if I wanted my work to have a continued relevancy, I would need to adapt to technological changes and evolving browser requirements.

As a substitute for FLASH, I went into HTML5/CSS/JavaScript and, in particular, the very useful HTML5 code template, Reveal.js, created by Hakim El Hattab. Reveal.js is a good fit for me because of its open-source availability and its wide-spread use on the web. In addition, for a non-coder like me, Reveal.js offers a relatively simple template to create digital works for the web, but it also can be "hacked" so writers can employ many inventive and unusual approaches toward narrative and the use of multimedia. I recommend its simple interface to students and others in the field of electronic literature usually by saying, "If I, as a non-coder, can create digital works for the web using Reveal.js, then you can, too!"

My first incursions into HTML5 were stories like "My Life in Three Parts" (2013), "The Fall" (2015), and "The Shootout" (2016). While creating these works, I also converted a number of older FLASH works into HTML5: "When I was President" (2007/2020), "MyNovel.org" (2006/2020), "Lord's Prayer, The" (2007/2020), and others. I have continued using HTML5 in

more recent works within *The Forever Club* series (2018-2019) and *The Method Detective* series (2022-2023).

While creating these new works, I noted a few approaches writers can use to maximize audience engagement for HTML5 works of electronic literature published on the web:

- 1) I try to use an economy of language in digital works, where "less is more" is a useful approach when writing for the web. On the web, keeping a reader's attention is often a challenge; large blocks of text, or blocks of text uninterrupted by other media, contribute to that challenge. Minimizing the text allows readers to rest their eyes in the empty spaces where, in print-based publications, text usually resides. These empty spaces afford a temporary respite from the urgency of reading and can house alternative methods to story-telling.
- 2) Where we employ less text, supplementing the work with interactivity and multimedia elements can help to reinforce action and theme(s) and also keep readers engaged. The web is built for multimedia. A work of electronic literature that is solely text and without multimedia elements is not taking full advantage of audience expectation and what the web has to offer.
- 3) This is idiosyncratic, but I create images for text portions of my narratives—that is, I write the text in Photoshop and publish that text as images, which I then import into the HTML page. Controlling the sizes and placement of those text images using CSS gives me more control on how an audience reads the work. With the text as images, I can size them for various devices (phone, laptop, or desktop) and also make sure they are placed where I want them on the screen. Of course, with HTML5, you can use HTML text, but I like the control that using text images gives me (some would say you have the same control with HTML text but, again, I am idiosyncratic in this). The [TEMPLATE.html](#) page linked below gives examples of how this works.
- 4) As writers using HTML5, we can create a linear narrative line or, using internal links, we can set up non-linear narratives where the reader can "jump" from one story event to another. As digital writers, we can take advantage of this flexibility and create works that cater to a variety of audience expectations. Regardless of approach, we can consider offering a progress line at the bottom of the page which tells the reader where they are in the work. This is useful for linear works because it tells readers how much further they have until the end; when toggled off, the progress line is also useful by its absence: the reader does NOT know where they are in the work, and the illusion of a non-linear narrative is achieved.
- 5) The use of [Animate.css](#) (or an equivalent CSS image/text animator) adds visual stimulus to the page without burdening the reader with heavy load times. HTML5 tends to be visually static (compared to the visual dynamo FLASH was), and creating animations out of text and images can liven up the page, reinforce action and theme(s), and help keep readers engaged. The [TEMPLATE.html](#) page linked below gives examples of how this can work.
- 6) In addition, HTML5 allows the reader (via CSS and JavaScript) to trigger all types of animations and visual effects, whether produced by generators like [Animate.css](#), or not. The reader triggers these visual events and has the satisfaction of being empowered by that interaction (the events are 'caused' by the reader's input). The reader is also empowered by being able to

propel the narrative forward (or back, or anyplace in between) using swipe or mouse actions. These added audience engagements let the reader become a part owner of the narrative: the reader becomes, in effect, a supplemental author to the work. The TEMPLATE.html page linked below gives examples of how this can be achieved.

7) Embedding a deeply interactive event for the reader—a game or activity (e.g. leaving an audio message, or writing a message, into a database for other readers to hear or read)—can also increase reader engagement. Such a 'deep' interactive event, if strategically placed, can also reward the reader for their diligence in reading the work and getting as far as they have in the narrative. Such an event can also further the shared authorship mentioned above, where the reader becomes an active participant in the creation of the narrative. Of course, varying degrees of interactivity are available across the spectrum of electronic literature. Some works, like those made in VR, are deeply interactive and immersive throughout the whole experience, while others are less so.

8) The use of audio is an important part of digital narratives. HTML5 is robust in this area, and controlling the volume entry and exit points, and audio crossover effects (as readers move from page to page or section to section), helps generate mood in a narrative, emphasizes action, and can also reinforce theme(s). The TEMPLATE.html page linked below gives examples of how this can work.

9) Likewise, video can also be an important component in HTML5 works. This is easy to do using the <video> tag. The TEMPLATE.html page linked below gives examples of how this can work.

There are many other strategies, using HTML5/CSS/JavaScript, to help maximize audience engagement in works of electronic literature. Writers can find their own way concerning the application of these strategies, keeping in mind that often less text (rather than more) is best to keep reader engagement. Likewise, a well-balanced mix of multimedia (rather than an emphasis on one type) can also be useful, depending on subject matter. Additional strategies can be seen in the added links below and within the many works of electronic literature available on the web.

Hopefully, this Starter's Guide can help form a base on which beginning digital writers can grow and evolve their practice.

Works Cited

Bigelow, Alan. *About Alan Bigelow*, retrieved from <https://webyarns.com/about/> , 03 July, 2023.

LINKS:

reveal.js: <http://lab.hakim.se/reveal-js/#/>

TEMPLATE.html + TEMPLATE folder: <https://webyarns.com/TEMPLATE.zip>

Animate.css: <https://animate.style/>

"When I Was President: <https://webyarns.com/when/president.html>

Love. <https://webyarns.com/love/love.html>

Short Bio

Alan Bigelow has received the Robert Coover Award for Electronic Literature (2017); the Judge's Prize, Opening Up Digital Fiction Writing Competition (2017); First Runner Up, Digital Humanities Awards (2016); and the Lauréat du Prix (First Prize), BIPVAL international Prix de Poésie Média (2011). His work, installations, and conversations concerning digital fiction and poetry have appeared many places worldwide.

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