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Prying Open Digital Minds: Narrative Fluidity, Haptic Interactivity, and Attentive Reading in the Digital Novella *Pry*

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Abstract: *Pry* (2014), Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro's iOS app novella, intervenes in the discourse pertaining to attention crisis and endangerment of deep reading capabilities in the digital era, and designs a reading environment that demands, sculpts, and thematises attention in unprecedented ways. This paper critically examines how narrative fluidity, haptic agency, and ergodic structure converge in *Pry* to produce a reading environment where attention is physically performed and ethically weighted. Close reading of the text reveals that the reading process transforms into an embodied and participatory act by binding the plot progression to the reader's haptic engagement using a touch-screen interface. And, the novella remains inaccessible and latent without the reader's physical intervention, prompting ergodic interactivity. I argue that the work attempts to reconfigure distraction into an integral component of its attentional design and challenges the traditional notions of textual boundaries and reader agency. *Pry* also challenges traditional and sociocultural ideas about the nature of reading and experiments with the nuances of multidimensional reader experience, accelerated by multisensory engagement. Through close analysis of the work's gestural interface and storytelling techniques, we look into how the work critiques shallow reading, trains new attentional habits through gestural repetition, and achieves emotional and cognitive resonance in terms of literary engagement.

Keywords: *Haptic Interaction, Embodied Reading, Multimodal Storytelling, Attentive Reading, Narrative Fluidity*

Introduction

Pry is an app novella created by the art studio Tender Claws. The developers of the text describe the novella as “a book to watch and film to touch: a story revealed by opening a character’s eyes, pulling apart his memories and grasping his infinitely scrolling thoughts” (Cannizarro). As mentioned, *Pry* requires readers to physically manipulate the touchscreen interface through gesture-based interactions. The work’s innovative approach to storytelling transforms the tablet screen into what might be understood as a tactile manuscript. The article examines the potential of a multisensory interface to cater to interaction, attention, and the reading process.

The novella forms a matrix where the protagonist’s present and past life lay intertwined. The narrative constantly shifts between James’s present-day work in demolition and his crushing memories of military service and the guilt following the demise of Jessie. These temporal layers mirror the work’s technological layers, creating a complex archaeology of experience where past and present, memory and sensation, sight and blindness intertwine and interfere with one another. Simultaneously, his inner and outer worlds overlap. With two fingers, the reader has to “spread and hold open” the protagonist’s eyes to see and hear what he sees and hears. When we “pinch and hold closed,” layers of his subconscious are uncovered through fragmented texts and images. Each time you change the gesture or leave your hold, a new thought, image, or visual pops up, breaking the current one. The whole action seems as if the reader controls his eyes, prying it open and closed.

The work contains a prologue, epilogue, an appendix, and seven chapters that are accessed through a grid interface that visually represents the protagonist James’s fragmented consciousness. It combines textual, video, audio, and interactive layers. Video layers range from past and present events to extreme close-ups. Text styles vary from clearly readable prose to fragmented or overlapping words. Ambient environmental sounds, dialogues, and musical elements respond to gestural interaction. The audio-haptic integration makes readers feel present within James’s psychological landscape rather than observing it from a distance. The novella defies linearity and possesses no order for gestural movement. The story has elements hidden inside it that reveal themselves depending on what, when, and how one explores it. The visuals showing his present life are mostly linear and steady. At the same time, his inner, subconscious images and thoughts combine vivid and vague elements based on his mood.

The novella engages touch as a primary interface mode where text appears over, under, and within video layers. Here, meaning emerges from the interaction between visual, textual, and haptic elements rather than conforming to a single medium. As Anne Balsamo notes in *Designing Culture: The Technological Imagination at Work*, touch interfaces create different relationships between users and

digital content, enabling "more direct manipulation" and "more intimate interaction" than traditional computer interfaces (78). *Pry* creates overlapping and interfering connections wherein readers have to physically manipulate these layers to access different textual elements, creating a reading experience that is unique and based on personal choices.

Narrative Fluidity and the Fractured Mindscape

Pry has a fluid narrative structure where the story unfolds as a spatialised field of fragments, and the reader encounters shards of the past—a training exercise scene, a tense conversation with a partner, visuals of a sudden explosion, and so on—embedded beneath the present. There is no single, predetermined path to explore the novella, as it does not bind to a fixed sequential order or predetermined page order. The reader's choices of where and when to pry open the text determine the sequence, duration, and salience of memories. The multimodal approach of the novel establishes a synesthetic experience in which meaning emerges from the interplay between different senses.

Pry is structurally heterogeneous and does not allow a single mode of perception to dominate, ensuring that chapters operate as distinct sensory experiments, where each one demands a different mode of readerly engagement. Ayoe Quist Henkel notes that,

Every chapter in *Pry* builds on different aesthetic premises: one is mainly filmic, while another mostly comprises Braille. The appendix is an endlessly expanding text, although it is dependent on how many "diamond" points the reader has gained by reading the various chapters carefully and labyrinthically. Accordingly, a ludic structure becomes part of the process of reading (Henkel 91).

It makes the act of reading an exploratory play where reward functions as an attentional investment, with progress being measured by the depth of engagement.

Pry uses digital technologies to formulate a new version of the narrative mode of stream of consciousness. The past and present coexist on the same visual plane, wherein the protagonist's psychological state and disorientation become a performance or enactment. Jessica Pressman, in *The Novel in the Digital Age*, observes that "*Pry* employs multimedia to present human consciousness as multimodal and to stream it at paces that, unlike print literature, often exceed the comprehension of a reader's cognition" (265). The non-narrative and fragmented nature of traumatic memory is emphasised through flashback texts, audios, and visuals that lay scattered in his subconscious.

The digital-era reader, accustomed to multitasking and short attentional capacities, possesses skills needed to navigate through information distributed across a grid of potential access instead of a single

straight path. *Pry* exploits this learned cognitive habit and repurposes it for a deeply literary purpose, thereby making the fluidity of narrative feel less disorienting and more intuitive, and structures attention through a form of cognitive mapping that the work's interface directly supports. It mimics scrolling through social media feeds, but here, attention is not depleted, but carries the capacity to hold multiple, intersecting narrative strands in a dynamic mental map.

Attentional Architecture: Gesture as Cognitive Guidance

Smartphones, social media feeds, and hyperlinked texts are accused of fracturing the sustained concentration and deep reading capabilities that print-based literature nurtured. A series of cognitive researches, that study human minds reshaped by interruption and inattention, pinpoints a transition from immersive “deep reading” to one that modulates continuous partial attention. Electronic literature plays a crucial role in providing an antidote to this trend by designing interactive experiences that demand and reward forms of focus unique to the digital medium and generate new modes of attentive engagement. Rather than focusing attention on a linear sequence of words, *Pry* attempts to modulate, distribute, and physically enact attention across multisensory channels and temporal layers. *Pry* mediates attention at different levels: narrow focus during a delicate pinch to uncover a hidden video, multisensory attention when processing the simultaneous interplay of text, moving images, and sound, and selective attention when deciding which memory layer to explore next.

In contrast to the mental effort taken for sustaining attention in print text, *Pry* inscribes this onto the readers' physical movement. The pinch-open gesture embodies the psychological process of concentration. The fingers narrow to a point, then spread apart with deliberate force, mirroring the mental effort of focusing on a difficult memory or a painful truth. The work thus teaches the reader a form of somatic mindfulness, where attention is not merely a brain state but a whole-body performance. The device's haptic feedback—a subtle vibration when a scene transition is triggered—further reinforces this loop, providing a tactile reward for successful attentional investment. This transforms the digital reading environment from a site of potential distraction into a gymnasium for cognitive control. Thus, *Pry* subverts the critical assumption that digital media inevitably promotes distraction and demonstrates that the same technology can be designed to demand and reward prolonged concentration.

The screen is divided into distinct planes accessible through careful gestural navigation that functions as attentional cues. The novella requires deliberate, sustained motion, with precision rather than a swift tap or scroll, which makes it impossible to speed-read the text, and imposes a slower, more muscular rhythm that runs counter to the rapid scanning and skimming associated with internet era interaction. For example, blurred video memories present inside the crisp textual descriptions come to view only

when the reader places fingers on the screen and physically pries the text apart. It imposes a mechanical constraint where too little pressure fails to open the memory layer, and movement with excessive force risks missing the sensitive zone. *Pry* makes the attentional preoccupation physical and visible. The gestures function not as interruptions to an otherwise linear reading, they are the very instruments by which the reader orchestrates his/her cognitive engagement. Swiping laterally to move between past and present, for instance, externalises the mental act of shifting temporal frames. Each swipe links disparate moments in James's life, encouraging the reader to perceive connections that a linear chronology would obscure.

Interactivity and Haptic Agency

In the novella, interactivity is inseparable from narrative and becomes the ontological ground of the story, and progress depends highly on active, tactile mechanics. It remains inaccessible and latent without the reader's physical intervention prompting ergodic interactivity, a system proposed by Espen Aarseth, where the user's physical or mental effort is required to experience and navigate through a medium. In ergodic literature, "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth 1). *Pry* makes this effort literal as it demands gestural movements long enough to feel deliberate rather than accidental.

Pry comes under what Marie-Laure Ryan categorises as the second level of interactivity: interactivity affecting narrative discourse and the presentation of the story. In *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (2015), Ryan notes, "On this level, the materials that constitute the story are fully predetermined, but here the order in which the story is told is highly variable" (178). In the novella, even though the story or events always remain the same and culminate in a fixed ending in each chapter, the reader is given agency to make choices that alter the presentation of the story. One example to cite is the prolongation or speeding up of scenes based on the frequency, duration, and order of gestures used. Each act of prying open James's eyes also implicates readers in questions about privacy, vulnerability, and our right to access another's pain. The reader decides when to invade James's privacy, how long to hold a painful memory open, and whether to retreat to the safer surface text. These decisions also carry moral weight, transforming the interactive mechanic into a site of ethical deliberation.

The digital novella transcends the expectations of conventional literary texts, transforming itself into a fusion of art and innovation in order to survive the challenges the genre is facing in the digital era of attention deficit. *Pry* blurs the boundaries between novel and game, incorporating many aspects of gameplay. Jessica Pressman notes that "In *Pry*, gaming is reading, and reading a novel is a game" (264). The work maintains the readers' interest through its game-like interface, which drives the reader to play and explore each chapter to its fullest and earn all four diamonds. Brendan Keogh notes that

mobile games create a kind of “co-attentiveness, where the player is paying full attention to two worlds at one time” (271). Similarly, the app novella overrides the traditional dichotomies of attention/distraction and immersion/distance and promotes a “co-attentiveness” between the reading process and what is being read by creating a dynamic relationship between the reader and the fictional world.

The novella draws on metafictional elements and prompts “a meta-consciousness to the reading process” (Henkel 100), drawing attention to the embedded medium. Rather than providing an immersive experience characteristic of electronic fiction, it emphasises hypermediacy both structurally and thematically through multimodal interfaces, game layout, and so on. The endless text in the appendix is yet another example set as a reminder of the endless possibilities of electronic media as a literary host.

Reading Beyond the Eye: Embodied Reading

In *Pry*, the process of reading transforms into a performance, rather than an ocular activity, where the hand takes up the role of a co-interpreter alongside the eye. It requires alphabetic processing, spatial reasoning, and kinesthetic movement, creating connections in the brain, or rewiring the brain to incorporate multisensory reading. It also helps to develop the neural flexibility that Maryanne Wolf prescribes and creates an embodied reading experience that provides both cognitive patience and physical deliberation. Drawing on cognitive neuroscience, Wolf argues that the fast-paced, skimming-oriented habits promoted by screens can weaken the brain’s capacity for the slow, inferential, and empathic processing that print reading cultivates. *Pry* offers a counterpoint to this warning by using digital affordances to foster a deep, embodied reading experience. It demonstrates that the touch-screen can, in turn, host the slow, effortful engagement she values, provided the software is designed with that goal.

Pry also explores and experiments with the nature of reading. The fourth chapter titled Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, for instance, incorporates paper-based page effects and prompts the prying movement to evoke visual and aural imitation of paper being ripped. The relationship between visual reading of surface text and gestural “reading” of the submerged layer establishes two simultaneous, interpenetrating modes of literacy. The reader must continuously decode alphabetic text while also interpreting the responsive behaviours of the interface—recognising, for instance, that a shimmer in the video layer invites a prying gesture. This dual literacy challenges the mono-modal assumptions of traditional reading pedagogy and expands the definition of what it means to be a fluent reader.

Reading happens through haptic and cognitive involvement, in which the interface demands the interaction of the reader. Ayoe Quist Henkel notes that this process is

supplemented by closeness between the reader and the tablet computer or smartphone, a relationship that is much more intimate and personal than if the literature had been realized through a stationary computer with a keyboard and mouse, but the story is more ambivalent because it demands concentration and distraction, thus differentiating the experience of reading a literary app from that of a paper book (94).

Readers finish *Pry* not when they have made final choices, but when they've explored the full range of available gestures and achieved maximum intimacy with James's experience. The completion of the text emerges from the exhaustion of haptic possibilities rather than from narrative resolution.

Conclusion

Pry proposes a reconsideration of the fundamental assumptions about literature in the digital era, opening new possibilities beyond simply translating print paradigms to digital contexts. It rediscovers touch as text and engages one's full sensory and ethical apparatus. To foster attention in an era of continuous partial attention, the text demands extended cooperation from the reader rather than passively turning pages or scrolling down with fingers. It transforms cognitive effort into haptic vocabulary, giving physical form to the act of sustained engagement. It provides readers agency to choose whether and how deeply to probe James' painful past, and in the process, transforms attention from a neutral cognitive resource into an ethically freighted commitment. Jessica Pressman asserts that "*Pry* propels readers to renew their understanding of what a novel is, what it can do, and how we read it" (265). The future of deep reading lies in redesigning the screen rather than passive rejection of the digital. It exemplifies literature for the age of touch, narrative for the era of embodied interaction, and storytelling that recognises the body as essential to understanding.

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