

# Literary Thresholds: Exploring the Edges of Ambient Literature

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of thresholds as a feature of ambient literature to explore this emerging literary form and its literary roots. The Ambient Literature project is a two year AHRC funded research programme coordinated by three universities in the UK (UWE Bristol, Bath Spa and Birmingham) to investigate the potential of situated literary experiences delivered by pervasive computing platforms, which respond to the presence of a reader to deliver story. The project has commissioned three works of ambient literature from established writers to understand the form, the experiences of its readers and the process of its authoring. This paper will address the positions of form, reader and author and argue that the emergence of ambient literature can extend the understanding of literature and textuality while drawing on the heritage of electronic literature.

## KEYWORDS

ambient literature; electronic literature; Gérard Genette; paratext; digital writing.

## RESUMO

Este artigo analisa o uso de limiares como característica da literatura ambiente para explorar esta forma literária emergente e as suas raízes literárias. O projeto *Ambient Literature* é um programa de investigação de dois anos, financiado pelo AHRC e coordenado por três universidades no Reino Unido (UWE Bristol, Bath Spa e Birmingham), com o objetivo de investigar o potencial das experiências literárias situadas produzidas por plataformas de computação pervasivas que respondem à presença de um leitor para criar a estória. O projeto encomendou três obras de literatura ambiente a escritores consagrados para compreender a forma, as experiências dos leitores e o processo de autoria. Este artigo trata os pontos de vista da forma, do leitor e do autor. Baseando-se na herança da literatura eletrônica, argumenta que o surgimento da literatura ambiente pode ampliar a compreensão da literatura e da textualidade.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

literatura ambiente; literatura eletrônica; Gérard Genette; paratexto; escrita digital.

This paper examines thresholds as a feature of ambient literature to explore this emerging literary form that connects readers to place using ubiquitous computing. The Ambient Literature project is a two year AHRC funded research programme coordinated by three universities in the UK (UWE Bristol, Bath Spa University and the University of Birmingham) to investigate the potential of situated literary experiences delivered by pervasive computing platforms, which respond to the presence of a reader to deliver story. The project has commissioned three works of ambient literature from writers Duncan Speakman, Kate Pullinger and James Attlee to understand the form, the experiences of its readers and the process of its authoring. Such literary experiences operate both spatially and temporally and a reader is brought into contact with a physical location as part of a narrative. The work is often presented to a reader in various ways, including audio as well as text and the reader's position is extended to read situation and context. While experiencing the narrative, a reader remains part of the physical environment and may be asked to walk along streets, listen to sounds or voices through headphones and encounter sights at the same time as being part of a located narrative. The thresholds of these situated literary works, where the reader's experience blurs with the world around them, is of significance as it has the potential to offer both an immersive literary experience and a reframing of the everyday world.

The technology used by the Ambient Literature Project is not typically new. Writers and artists have long experimented with locative storytelling and used GPS tracking to tell stories through tagging locations. There is a long history, in arts and performance, by artists such as Janet Cardiff, who creates audio walks, the writer Eli Horowitz (2014), who in his project *The Silent History* tagged stories to GPS locations so that the reader had to move between spaces to access story with the use of a smart phone, and working at the intersection between performance and game are Blast Theory, an artist group that uses interactive media to engage audiences. Countless others have explored this terrain and experimented with the idea of the situated reader who engages with a physical location through their movements in time and space. To add to existing practices in this field, the Ambient Literature Project is specifically interested in how ubiquitous technologies within smart phones can be used to explore wider issues of context and situation as well as place and how readers encounter literary works through experience.

To understand this literary form, this paper will offer the first of the project's three commissioned works, Duncan Speakman's *It Must Have Been Dark* by

*Then* (2017), as a case study. Speakman is a composer and director of the artists collective Circumstance with an interest in developing work where the line between audience and performer becomes blurred in uncontrolled environments; spaces where the artist or author has to relinquish a level of control of the narrative. A participant may be asked to engage in an audio work and be instructed to move through a physical urban space. The author of the work is unable to know what exactly the reader will encounter and so there must be space for an interruption from, for example, a passerby, an unexpected encounter or a strange sight in the physical environment. *It Must Have Been Dark* by *Then* is a book and audio experience that uses music, narration and field recordings from three places that are experiencing rapid human and environmental changes: the swamplands of Louisiana, Latvian villages and the Tunisian Sahara. During the work, the reader is asked to seek out types of locations in their own environment, such as a place where people live, evidence of a physical barrier and of the natural world, and once in these environments it offers them sounds and stories from remote but related situations. At each location, the reader is invited to make connections and, in the process, create a map of both where they are physically located and of the places that may not exist in the future.

To begin to understand the thresholds of ambient literature, the spaces between the physical environment and the literary experience, this paper will consider Gérard Genette's (1997) theory of paratextual analysis, as detailed in his influential work *Seuils*, published in France in 1987 and translated in English in 1997 as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. The paratext is the material outside a text that ensures or constructs its reception. It is also interior to the text as a set of conventions, which represent a sort of threshold that a text is either constrained by or seeks to overcome. Genette views the paratext as a liminal device within the framework of the printed book (including signs of authorship, notes and front and back covers), which form a threshold between what is inside and what is outside the book. He defines it as:

[A] zone between between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that - whether well or poorly understood and achieved - is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies. (Genette, 1997: 2)

Genette recognizes that a text is interpreted by a reader through its threshold. All elements, including the cover, date, title and information about the author, give the reader an impression of the text. These make up a framework, which serves as a way for readers to make sense of the context of the book. As a zone of 'transaction,' the paratext allows the reader to take part in the process of textual construction. They are able to interpret the text and create their own understanding. The presence of the paratext can be applied to a work of ambient literature and the thresholds of the situated experience can be explored as an,

often shifting and uncontrollable, framework, which transmits meaning to readers. The boundaries of a work of ambient literature are porous, and the play with the environment around it. Through this analysis, this paper will address the positions of form, reader and author and argue that the emergence of ambient literature can extend a contemporary understanding of literature and textuality.

## I. TEMPORAL FORM

As a situated literary experience, a work of ambient literature is not bound only by a material form, such as a printed book, although it may include printed elements. At first this seems to go against Genette's understanding of the paratext as a place for physical material through which to interpret the book. Without such a framing device, and with its position embedded in the physical world, the boundaries of this narrative form are in flux and, often, invisible. There is little sense of a prescriptive paratext for readers to use to orient themselves. There may be instructions from the author, either in text or audio form, but these are often guiding rather than directional. The narrative often shifts and responds to the presence of the reader and its beginning and ending can become blurred. It takes on a temporal, rather than simply a locative, form, with similarities to features of performance and participatory art forms. It has a beginning and an end but the reader may not know what to expect in-between. This lack of expectation, of an unfamiliarity with the emerging form, may lead the reader to be more open to the world around them, to read their experience as a form of performance, unsure themselves of the boundaries between the work and the physical environment. This guiding into a literary experience is a form of paratext, an invitation to inhabit and experience the liminal spaces between narrative and place. It reduces the sense that there is 'text' and 'off-text.'

As works of ambient literature respond to the presence of a reader to deliver story, a sense of unpredictability is inherent in this emerging literary form. For example, a reader may be prompted to explore a city street and the urban fabric of this physical location becomes an integral part of the narrative but one that the author cannot fully control. There may be interruptions by passersby, a reader might get lost in a physical space, encounter places that cannot be accessed or unexpected sights that prompt distraction from an otherwise potentially immersive experience.

It is in these spaces between reader and place that the positions of author and reader appear to be shifting and, in this, an interesting literary form is taking shape. The site of reading becomes an integral part of the story and the reader embodies both the narrative and the real world, with its unpredictability, serendipity and potential for interruptions to the reading experience. These can be seen as literary features, rather than features of arts practice or techniques

used to produce heritage walks where factual information about a place is tagged to historical locations using GPS.

## II. UNPREDICTABLE SPACES

Daniel Sutko and Adriana de Souza e Silva (2011) argue that pervasive computing, on which ambient literature relies, offers an opportunity for us to be connected to our environment not just immersed in a device, such as a smart phone. However, this opens up the potential for unpredictability when applied to the development or experience of a literary work. A reader physically navigating a space while reading a work of situated digital literature cannot always be controllable or directed by an author in the same way as in a printed book. Unpredictable spaces are a part of the narrative but they are spaces that the author cannot fully control. They are off-text, liminal spaces and there is opportunity for readers to begin to read context. These spaces are part of an author's authorial territory but, as they might not know exactly what the reader sees in front of them, uncontrollable elements may become unexpected features of the story. Such spontaneous interruptions that influence the way that the narrative is experienced can be fragmented and ephemeral but still readable.

This experience of being part of a text but open to external and uncontrollable elements can resemble visual art and performance art practices, of participation and improvisation, of the reader taking part in the literary work, not just reading a text but also reading an experience. For example, in Speakman's *It Must Have Been Dark by Then* the reader is asked to move through a space and is engaged with the world both physically and imaginatively. They are able to make some choices regarding the direction in which they walk but each experience of the work will be unique, much like a performance. This follows Michel de Certeau's view that "walking in the city is an acting out of place" (de Certeau, 1984: 92). To de Certeau, both walking and language are creative acts, which you can improvise and are allowed opportunities to make your own connections. By walking, a reader experiencing *It Must Have Been Dark by Then* is slowed down and there is room and space for interruption. This allows for experimentation with the paratext. The reader can be guided by the author and given paratextual instruction but there are elements of the physical environment for them to explore.

However, a reader may not be as free as they think they are. When writing about the *dérive*, Guy Debord (1994) recognizes that the city controls a person's wanderings through currents, fixed points and vortexes:

In a *derive*, one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for work and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. The element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the *derive* point of

view, cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry or exit from certain zones. (50)

*It Must Have Been Dark by Then* encapsulates this idea. The reader is instructed to navigate a space but there are boundaries and borders in place. The physical city controls their movements and they cannot pass entirely freely from one place to the next. As the work is designed to be experienced in any location, these controls are unpredictable. There are rivers, commercial and business zones, fenced off areas and unsafe places. The reader's inability to access certain areas of a location, as part of a situated narrative, serve as a metaphor. In *It Must Have Been Dark by Then*, readers experience a work about physical global borders while experiencing borders in front of them. They experience the thresholds of the text and environments both physically and metaphorically. This experience transmits meaning to the reader through paratextual elements designed by Speakman but not fully under his control. From them, the reader is able to read the context of the work beyond the narrative.

### III. INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL WORLDS

When readers experience an ambient literary form, they are asked to simultaneously navigate both a physical and imaginative world while embodied in a narrative. This is an orchestrated experience with room for the world to enter and space for a reader to make connections. This involves re-thinking of what we understand as literary and a space for understanding how we can challenge and reshape the act of reading by developing new, and repurposing existing, literary techniques.

In *It Must Have Been Dark by Then*, space is left for moments of serendipity, which changes the experience for the reader. Speakman leads the readers, through the voice of the narrator speaking through headphones into their ears, to find a place in the city where they can find something growing. This could be a shoot of plant peeking through a piece of tarmac or a tree surviving among the concrete. The moment of noticing a piece of nature can feel to readers like a moment of coincidence, as though the unseen author knows exactly what they can see in front of them.

### IV. SITUATED READING EXPERIENCES

In the situated reading experience, the reader must navigate the thresholds of a narrative, the zone between 'text' and 'off-text' as well as the narrative itself. It is often unclear where the narrative begins and ends and the reader must read the context of the work, and engage with its peripheries. In *It Must Have Been Dark by Then*, the reader is situated in physical and temporal spaces. Readers do

not simply read about a time and place, they experience it, they are immersed within it through the act of walking through a physical space.

There is a wide history of literary walking that we can draw on including the figure of Walter Benjamin's *Flâneur* and Guy Debord's experience of the *dérive*. However, these present engagements with a particular kind of walking, a celebration of wandering and of movement through space. Readers can imagine they are there through the reading process but they are not physically there at all. We can also look at the work of writers such as Teju Cole who, in his novel *Open City*, positions his reader in Manhattan and Rebecca Solnit who has explored the experience of being lost and Iain Sinclair who unravels London for his readers.

Ambient literature goes further. A reader is physically situated in a place and an author is able to draw deeper connections to context and time. For example, this can be achieved through an audio piece told to the reader through headphones and the experience of someone telling you a story as you walk connects you directly to the narrative. By walking through a space, readers are able to connect to the place through movement, through physicality, by actually being there and the story unfolding as they walk. In this way, they embody the narrative, they are a fundamental part of it and it could not exist without them. They no longer operate at the thresholds of the narrative and, instead, they enact the narrative.

## V. DISTRACTION AND IMMERSION

Drawing on the diverging work of Malcolm McCullough (2015) and Ulrik Schmidt (2013), we can view reader's experience of a work of ambient literature, such as *It Must Have Been Dark By Then*, as being one of distraction and immersion. The reader's attention can be orchestrated using ambient materials; the fabric of a city street alongside pervasive technologies. Readers navigate a physical space and the author is able to draw attention to different elements as they create a narrative that includes textual, audio as well as physical elements. The physical world and the fictional world can be separately brought into the foreground and then moved back into the background. The readers' attention can dissolve in two opposite directions, towards distraction and a lack of concentration or towards an absorbed trance as they navigate a space.

Authors can use such techniques to play with the experience for the reader. They can shift the thresholds of the text and move it into and out of a paratextual framework. In *It Must Have Been Dark by Then*, the reader is situated in physical and temporal spaces. Readers do not simply read about a time and place, they experience it, they are immersed within. They are drawn into the physical location of the environment they are in and then shifted to thinking about another geographical place, located further away. Multiple locations, and the interplay between them, exist at the same time for the reader. This can be evident in a

print-bound narrative but there is something unique about the experience of being located in a physical and temporal space. The thresholds of the text and constructed, broken down and then reconstructed for the reader while at the same time there are elements of uncontrollability.

## VI. AMBIENT AUTHORSHIP

Ambient authorship requires an author to relinquish a degree of control over their narrative and leave room for external features, such as the influence of the physical environment and unpredictability. There must be room for an acknowledgment that the thresholds of the narrative are not static. Interruptions and interventions require a rethinking of authorial control and the reading experience. There is the potential for writers to leave space for the world to enter the story in interesting ways. This process involves a shift in the understanding of authorship and a recognition of the need for adapted writing practices. An author must leave space for the world to enter the narrative in often surprising ways, i.e. through situations that a reader may encounter through a situated literary experience that are not directed or controlled by the author. This influences the reading process as a reader reads a context or situation as part of the narrative. Writing practices must harness unpredictability and make it a feature of the work, which may resemble writing for performance or a participatory artwork as readers are invited, partly through paratextual elements such as directions, to enter a space between their physical environment and a narrative.

## VII. SOUND

Sound is an emerging feature of ambient literature and one used in *It Must Have Been Dark by Then* through the use of evocative sound as well as audio voice recordings. Through experiencing a physical location, the reader has the experience of being between spaces, which can be seen to resemble the space between an audience and performer. Sound can be used as a barrier or an invitation between these spaces and raises interesting questions. Does an audio work that uses headphones connect readers to their surroundings or are they separated from it? Are they open to the possibility of interaction or is it a private, internal experience? Can sound be a barrier for a reader or an invitation to cross a boundary? In his research into the experience of using a Sony Walkman in the 1990s, Iain Chambers (1994) recognized that it “offered the possibility of a micro-narrative, a customised story and soundtrack, not merely a space but a place, a site of dwelling” (51). During this experience, the line is blurred between private and public space. A listener is in the world but is separated by a muffling sensation that had hardly been experienced before. In later research into use of the ipod



in the 2000s, Michael Bull (2007) describes the listening experience as “accompanied solitude.”

This effect of sound in immersive narratives has been experimented with by sound artist Janet Cardiff and, although not producing literary work, it is relevant for our discussion. In her works, she is often interested in bringing the sounds of the real world in to the listener’s experience. In her 2004 work, *Her Long Black Hair*, Cardiff guides participants using a recorded audio soundtrack to walk through New York’s Central Park and view a series of photographs that they are given to carry. What is relevant for a discussion of the use of sound in ambient literature is how she brings the sounds of the real world into her work. She tells her listeners, of the experience of Central Park, “It’s loud here isn’t it? When you’re in a city like New York, you have to think about the sounds like they are a symphony or you go a bit crazy.” These are not sounds that she has produced but, instead, they are the everyday soundtrack of ambulance sirens, car horns and traffic passing by as well as shouting, laughter and overheard fragments of conversations. In other contexts, they could be seen as interruptions but, instead, Cardiff has harnessed an element of the city that she cannot control and used it as a feature of her work. She offers a threshold for a participant in her audio walk to pass through.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

Ambient literature challenges the concept of a literary form, as it requires its authors to let go of a traditional sense of authorial control and engage with the idea of porous textual thresholds and uncontrollable narratives. An author can write for a physical and temporal space open to unpredictable experiences and these can become a part of the narrative. The writing experience is broadened as the author can orchestrate an experience for readers and there is the potential to develop, or repurpose, literary techniques, such as those from performance and arts practices.

Genette’s understanding of the paratext can be expanded for an insight into how a reader can pass between the narrative and the physical environment and back again. The physical and the fictional can be brought together and the reader moves between the two, reading context. The reader can be guided by instructional information in paratextual form and also encouraged to inhabit a space between ‘text’ and ‘off-text’ at the threshold of the narrative. The author of a work of ambient literature is able to experiment with unpredictability and uncontrollability as they explore textual thresholds and boundaries to produce new digital works.

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