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**Postdigital Ludic Practice: An
investigation into the transformative
posthuman potentialities catalysed by
the tools and methods of digital writing.**

K. Wareham Morris

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University of Worcester

Abstract

This thesis situates itself within the field of digital literatures, which is also sometimes referred to as “literary media” (Ensslin et al. 2023). It investigates writing and reading practices within an inherently scary and changeable cultural landscape, where digital technologies continue to invade and rupture all aspects of our everyday life, thus demanding radical shifts in our ontological and epistemological knowledges and traditions.

Existing frameworks of knowledge in the field of digital literatures are limited in that they do not explicitly examine the postdigital slippage (Jordan and Lutostański 2024) evidenced within contemporary literary cultures; where literature although not defined nor identified as “digital” has an ever-increasing connection with digital practices and processes (Adema et al. 2024). The extent to which this has impacted (digital) writing practices is also limited. In addition, the existing research on “digital games” and “ludic mechanics” (Ensslin 2014) does not precisely identify playful behaviours in the “making and doing” of literary media. This research prioritises playful behaviours as evidence of the postdigital where technologies are utilised in creative, hybrid ways as part of the messy lived realities of the prevailing culture and, thus necessitate changes in perceptions of writers, readers, even “humans” (Alexenberg 2011; Braidotti 2019).

Utilising self-directed ethnomethodology in the form of research journalling, I was able to explore the relationship between writers, readers and machines. Through the productive evaluation of my own writing practices I developed an original toolkit, **postdigital ludic practice**. This practice-led approach was utilised to interrogate the creative-critical hybrid tools and methods of this practice: creative experiments were employed to accurately account for its processes whilst simultaneously refining the processes. Postdigital ludic practice positions itself alongside existing frameworks of knowledge, such as those situated within the New Humanities whilst also operating amongst the ongoing postdisciplinary practices of the critical posthumanities (Braidotti 2019).

My experiments with postdigital ludic practice produced the innovative creative artefact, *Violen)t Existence*: these original digital texts are productive and original outcomes of this practice-led research. These poems were also published as traditional page poetry, *Violet Existence* by Broken Sleep Books in 2022. *Violen)t Existence* operates as a dynamic web archive of multimodal hypermedia poetry and is comprised of multiple rhizomatic structures. Beyond its thematic foci (contemporary contradictory manifestations of my womanhood) it typifies the potential of postdigital ludic practice to perform as a form of artist (De-Gonzalo and Perez-Prieto 2008, cited in Aladro-Vico et al. 2018) posthuman knowledge production (Braidotti 2019).

One of *Violen)t Existence*'s iterations is the lyric essay submitted in its page version as chapter four of this thesis. This chapter demonstrates the potential of postdigital ludic practice as a hybrid creative-critical toolkit which can be operationalised for purposeful and meaningful analysis, whilst remaining playful with its form, style and structure. Here postdigital ludic practice functions alongside literary close reading and acknowledged critical approaches within the Literary Humanities yet resists becoming another theoretical framework. It is an original contribution to the postdisciplinary practices of the posthumanities which whilst working alongside established frameworks of knowledge, simultaneously experiments with creative-critical hybridity and "minor sciences" (Braidotti 2019) with the potential to change perceptions and formations. This research perceives these possible transformations as evidence of *jouissance*: an affecting relational assemblage which creates opportunities for creative freedoms and modes of resistance whilst celebrating new pluralistic posthuman experiences.

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Introduction

Context and Rationale: Defining Postdigital Ludic Practice

This thesis situates itself within the field of digital literatures, which is also sometimes referred to as “literary media” (Ensslin et al. 2023). It investigates writing and reading practices within an inherently scary and changeable cultural landscape, where digital technologies continue to invade and rupture all aspects of our everyday life, thus demanding radical shifts in our ontological and epistemological knowledges and traditions. This research recognises that the dynamism of this context is central to the critical investigations taking place in the New Humanities and, offers a unique hybrid creative-critical toolkit – *postdigital ludic practice* – for researchers which can be purposefully employed in these contexts. This is a significant contribution to knowledge. This research includes experiments with postdigital ludic practice to develop its definitions and assess its manifestations. Postdigital ludic practice positions itself alongside existing frameworks of knowledge whilst also operating amongst the ongoing postdisciplinary practices of the critical posthumanities.

The primary concern of this research is to add to the existing corpus of critical engagement with digital literatures within the New Humanities. Early in the research process, it became obvious that historical distinctions between “old” and “new”, “analogue” and “digital” literatures were increasingly flawed and at times, misleading (see Landow 2006). For example, Barnard (2019) briefly discusses how digital writers engage with old, analogue processes, whilst failing to capture the sustained complex engagement with and prevailing nature of these systems and institutions affecting digital writers, their practices, and careers (publishing, for example). Whilst the field of Literary Studies widely acknowledges the existence of literatures “born digital” (ELO n.d. online), academic discussions of the “Literary Canon” itself remain tied to a slowly evolving process of “decolonisation”, shifting from printed books by old, white, men to more fluid and inclusive systems (Braidotti 2019). Meanwhile, despite not being explicitly defined nor categorised as “digital”, writing, poetry, and indeed “the book” have become increasingly entangled with digital practices and processes (Adema et al. 2024).

The existing methodological and theoretical frameworks for the production and analysis of literatures, digital or otherwise, do not explicitly account for this “postdigital” slippage. “Postdigital” does not simply mean “beyond digital” but accounts for the omnipresence of the “digital”, whereby hybridity and transmediality create new conditions, contexts and ways of being (Jordan and Lutostański 2024). These socio-cultural innovations and transformations have created multiple, open, non-hierarchical systems which disrupt hegemonic definitions and perceptions of “analogue” and “digital”, “Literature” and “literary media” and, “human” and “machine” (Adema et al. 2024). To this end the term I am using, “postdigital” highlights the messy physical lived realities of the prevailing technological culture and facilitates necessary changes in familiar mindsets and values (Jordan and Lutostański 2024).

These lived realities are symptomatic of the contemporary context defined by Braidotti as the “posthuman condition” (2013, 2017, 2019), which is simultaneously comprised of the cultural realities of advanced capitalism *and* “posthumanism”. These realities include the “fourth industrial revolution” (Braidotti 2019: 2) of progressive technologies which demand the blurring of digital, physical and biological boundaries, through necessary intimacy with digital devices, and transform social, environmental and psychic connections in nonlinear, intense ways whilst reinforcing inequalities. Braidotti (2019: 2-3) also identifies the anxieties and consequences of “the sixth extinction” which is comprised of the inevitability of the Anthropocene determined by neoliberal capitalism including the material outcomes such as dying species and habitats. According to Braidotti (2019) this “condition” requires the radical rethinking of familiar mindsets and values including our “humanity”. The rapid pace of socio-cultural change is so affecting and transformational it is difficult to perceive let alone define. “Posthumanism” then is a critique of the Enlightenment Humanist ideals of “man” (Braidotti 2019: 3-4), which cannot account for new subjectivities simultaneously comprised of human and non-human matter and the multi-dimensional paradoxical experiences this creates. Braidotti (2013, 2017) offers a working hypothesis for the “kinds of subjects we are becoming” which is collective, open, multiple and non-hierarchical and is worthy of our times. Postdigital hybridisation operating in this context resists the most challenging aspects of our existence (for example, technological determination and dominance; or social, cultural, political,

financial crisis): although struggling to make sense, engagement with these practices paradoxically increases our chances to make sense.

This thesis argues that play is integral to the posthuman condition and inherent in postdigital practices. That is to say that the technological revolution of which Braidotti (2019) speaks has played a crucial part in the creation of the ludic century (Zimmerman 2010), where the presence, significance and recognition of play and games has become the dominant socio-cultural organisational form. Playful elements have infiltrated our lives beyond the magic circle of games and are positioned as fundamental to contemporary behaviour (Dippel and Fizek 2016). One way of making sense of our chaotic existence is to play: we seek rewards through lifestyle tracking apps; people create memes and share them across the globalised network; landscapes are designed to engage communities in playful activities; people reinvent themselves online through playful experimentation with their identity. These are just a handful of examples where play exists in our cultural practices seemingly without any specific serious goal. Yet play is a formative experience, helping us to tolerate and make sense of our posthuman existence with the potential to create new dimensions for analysis within theoretical cultural research (Dippel and Fizek 2016). In the words of Sartre (1995: 170): “[T]he desire to play is fundamentally the desire to be”.

With these material socio-cultural realities in mind, it is necessary to re-think “writers” and writing and “readers” and reading. This research considers these subjectivities as posthumans part of a “triological relationship” (Weight 2006: 413-414) where computers act as intermediaries between “writers”, “texts” and “readers”. This research recognises and acknowledges the possibilities afforded digital writers when they are engaged with social media networks and user generated content creation. Sharing technologies connect writers to a myriad of computational networks and communities; “readers” who are engaged in the collective sharing practices of the participatory internet (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins et al. 2013) and know how to remix and recontextualise the content they engage with online in a cross-pollination of critical and creative ideas (Barnard 2015). Moreover, this research asserts that these platforms are not merely useful for writing research or inspiration but are inextricably

linked to the rhizomatic structures of the digital text(s) which are collaborative ecosystems comprised of posthuman writers, users and non-human networks of multimodal literary elements.

This thesis develops the ideas of Barthes (1977), specifically the “death of the author” and the “writerly text” in the posthuman context and in relation to the creation of literary media specifically. Digital writers must play with their non-human collaborators, machines, computational networks and algorithms whilst engaged in the processes of writing, and this research argues that the traditional register for describing and assessing writing practice does not adequately capture these forms of posthuman engagement. “Readers” are also familiar with playful engagement in digital contexts and utilise these skills and knowledges when engaged with playful digital literary texts; these are used to access, activate, discover and interpret various components of the text. Indeed, in the field of digital literatures literary media are not only defined as interactive but acknowledged for engaging their audience in play through their “ludic mechanics” (Ensslin 2014). Yet this thesis is not only interested in the playful components of digital literatures and how they can be interpreted, as this has been discussed extensively before (Aarseth 1994; Hayles 2002; Ensslin 2014), but in how these are designed, created and architected through playful multimodal writing practices which work alongside traditional “writing”. If play helps people make sense of the world and the texts being created are playful, it is likely digital writers engage in playful behaviours as part of their creative practice.

We assume digital writers know how to purposefully, productively and creatively engage with the digital devices and tools which propagate and infiltrate their cultural realities, yet they may lack the skills and knowledge to keep up with the rapid pace of change in these technological spheres and, may not fully understand their functions or implications. Although Ensslin (2014) and Barnard (2017) recognise that digital writers often become software innovators working within digital landscapes that are so quick to change that technologies may have moved on before a piece of writing is “finished”, there is no specific register to account for these postdigital phases or challenges. The digital writer is not only engaged in

creative practice, but also critical thinking in order to keep up with technological change, utilising hardwares, softwares and networks to their advantage (Skains 2023).

This research identifies, defines and applies the term “postdigital ludic practice” to describe the entangled, creative-critical hybrid practices of posthuman writers embedded and embodied within a dizzying posthuman context. The invention of postdigital ludic practice, as an original creative-critical hybrid framework provides an operational register which exists beyond an imaginary analogue/digital history or binary and accounts for these complex creative-critical hybrid realities, practices and processes. At its most straightforward, postdigital ludic practice is defined as a set of tools and methods useful for the types of creative-critical writing and reading practices associated with digital literatures; a practice-led¹ methodology which engages with and acts upon posthuman transformations in both creative and critical ways producing transparent critique of “human” and “digital” assumptions amongst other simplistic binaries, to expose them as false. In applying postdigital ludic practice as a method, creatives disrupt the normative presence of “digital” and move beyond techno-deterministic definitions, practices and spaces to establish an assemblage which re-evaluates their status as “writer”, “creative”, “human” agent and therefore has the potential to create new consciousness.

Postdigital Ludic Practice: Methodological Function

Fundamental to this research are my own digital writing practices. Over a four-year period, I sought to record, reflect and analyse, collect, organise and architect my own writing practices whilst in the process of creating the digital text, ***Violen)t Existence***. For this research, the terms “postdigital” and “ludic” are used to describe these practices, precisely accounting for the strategic, playful endeavours of the posthuman writer and their “failings”. There is playful engagement with technological sophistication, efficiencies and relationships to capture the

¹ This research is practice-led rather than practice-based because it interrogates forms of creative writing practice and uses these investigative outcomes to develop new knowledge around digital creative writing practice specifically, alongside the original creative artefacts the practice produces; there is an iterative and rhizomatic relationship (Smith and Dean 2009). This new knowledge has operational significance for digital writers.

paradoxical push/ pull of the posthuman condition, oscillating incessantly between hope and despair, isolation and connection.

My engagement with the existing scholarship on digital literatures noted that the discussions around the precise creation of “ludic mechanics” (Ensslin 2014), namely specific “writing” practices were limited. Indeed, these discussions (for example Skains 2017, 2019, 2023; Barnard 2015, 2017, 2019) did not explicitly consider the significance of postdigital play within the context of the creation. My digital writing practices revealed themselves to be playful. My reflections also evidenced a more nuanced interrogation of these practices, not simply “digital” but “postdigital”, that being engaged with traditional analogue methods whilst also working to learn and operate multiple hardware, software and platforms to create and architect the multimodal elements of the text. Although working to perceive some of the precise modes and contexts affecting digital writers, these existing frameworks did not explicitly engage with play as a formative activity with transformative potential; nor how digital practices worked alongside and informed analogue practices.

My “humanity” is inscribed in the postdigital processes utilised to produce digital creative-critical outcomes including: the production and integration of videos of me performing my original poems at open mic nights; poems which are also printed in a “traditional” pamphlet that were originally handwritten or drafted on my smart phone; poems which can be simultaneously “read” online via a website, of which every page, image, link has been manually architected and “hand-coded”² by me. Furthermore, through a productive critical reflection of the processes, aesthetics and material conditions of my writing practices I was able to prioritise my situated “human” experiences, to re-materialise their “digital” relationships and produce further creative-critical hybrid responses. These digital writing practices are comprised of both traditional literary features and writing, editing and drafting stages and, formative postdigital ludic engagement with various digital techniques and applications. Moreover “postdigital” accounts for the potential for posthuman practitioners

² “Hand-stitched coding” or more commonly, “hand-coded” is an informal, metaphorical term used in coding to describe software that is carefully created, line-by-line by a human programmer. It signifies craft-personship as opposed to the efficiencies of copying and pasting of generic AI-generated code.

to playfully assert their digital, biological, cultural and spiritual connectivities when using technologies thus blurring creative boundaries (Alexenberg 2011).

My practice-led research enabled the recognition and articulation of my postdigital ludic writing experiences and methods. The tools and methods of postdigital ludic practice are not only significant to this research and form part of its original contribution to knowledge but are integral to the development of the creative output, *Violen(t) Existence* which unquestionably evidences my experiments with that practice. Chapter three of this thesis outlines the processes and outcomes of my self-directed ethnomethodology (Skains 2017) in detail utilising recorded notes, journals, scrapbooks and reflections over four years. This research recognises the validity of the research journal which itself is comprised of various postdigital activities and findings. My research journals supported the writing, speaking (i.e. performance) and thinking of *Violen(t) Existence*. To my mind, my research journals operated similarly to commonplace books which have a long history particularly for female writers who used them to record and organise their learning, priorities and motivations with the intention of becoming publications or not and with an awareness that knowledge requires a variety of approaches and genres (Burke 2009, 2013).

As a form of activist scrapbooking, these commonplace books served as a tactile and intimate record of knowledges, experiences and creativities; messy autobiographical accounts of my lived experiences which could serve as potential for my creative practice and its outcomes. I adopted a critical thinking mindset to categorise, analyse and synthesise various postdigital ludic writing behaviours, meaning I was able to think strategically about how to account for these behaviours and activities and how this might serve other digital writers and creatives. The systematic presentation of these autobiographical archives forms a toolkit for digital writers whilst also working to continue to decolonise the predominantly male field of digital literatures (Mencia 2021). This research does not seek to define a fixed and definitive register as this would undermine the potential of the digital literatures it produces. Instead, it acknowledges “conceptual creativity” (Braidotti 2019: 84) especially in its recognition of non-humans (including machine algorithms) in posthumanism to adequately articulate and

account for the environments, biologies and continuums they move amongst and the agency they possess (Parikka 2015; King 2011). Each tool and method are written in the continuous present to acknowledge the ongoing, potentially contradictory “processes of becoming” (Braidotti 2019).

Postdigital Ludic Practice: Value-based Design Experiments and Outcomes

Violen)t Existence is comprised of various literary ecosystems: it is published as a traditional poetry pamphlet, *Violet Existence* (published in 2022 by Award-winning UK publisher, Broken Sleep Books); and it operates in multiple digital spaces comprised of various multimodal components including hypertext links, sound and video which can be accessed through a home website. *Violen)t Existence* is informed by the traditions of both Literature and digital literatures, including women’s writing and ludic mechanics and can be characterised as distinctive and innovative hypermedia poetry³. It was important to consider what outcomes the processes of postdigital ludic practice would and could produce.

I began writing this poetry in 2020, specifically during the first Covid 19 lockdown. I suffer with the chronic, incurable illness, Crohn’s Disease and so I found myself in the shielding category, locked in my house with my husband and two very small children. These poems not only explore my fragile existence as a disabled, working-class woman within systemic patriarchal structures such as the family and domestic spaces, medicine and healthcare, and academia (I had to pivot to online working from home as a full time Senior Lecturer and Course Leader), but are inextricably connected to my various fragile existences: global pandemic; threat of war; the climate crisis. Similarly to the work of Susan Howe (1983, 1995), my poetry acts as autobiography to extend representations of history. *Violen)t Existence* offers new playful dimensions of thought on disabled women, the Covid 19 pandemic, working class women in academia, wives, mothers and thus demands complex engagement.

³ Hypermedia and digital poetry are formally defined and historicised in the next chapter, the Literature Review.

Viole(n)t Existence is inherently posthuman not simply in its exploration of the manifestations and contradictions of my subjectivities and the contexts in which they operate, but also because, although originally published as “page poetry” in 2022 (entitled *Violet Existence*) having been reviewed by notable Award-winning, poets, including John McCullough and Helen Ivory, I continued to work with the poetry and its digital multimodal and performance elements. The outcomes of these are recorded and evidenced in the *Viole(n)t Existence* website which demands further playful and complex digital engagement from its users. The poetry is not only connected to and informed by modes of play and digital writing, but other forms of writing and genres of literature including:

- the poetic experimentation utilised in eco-poetry, geopoetics and “walking poetry” to engage with psychogeography, memory and trauma.
- Women’s “confessional” poetry (for example the work of Louise Glück and Sharon Olds) and nonfiction forms such as memoir.
- Docupoetics, such as *Truth Street* by David Cain (2019) and *The Nagasaki Elder* by Anthony Owen (2017).
- Female Beat poetry including the work of Diane di Prima.
- Contemporary women writers investigating culture and identity including Joy Harjo and Natalie Diaz.
- Ekphrastic poetry.
- Vispo (visual poetry).
- Romanticism and the “proto-romantic” female poets, including Anne Finch.

It is important to recognise that *Violet Existence* and *Viole(n)t Existence* are not mutually exclusive creative entities; they are relational outcomes of my postdigital ludic writing. Indeed, the pamphlet and the digital multimodal elements evidence the complex mutable multiplicitous processes of becoming digital poetry and the complex assemblage they create; connecting writers, readers and machines in playful modes of expression and affect. This further justifies the importance of devising postdigital ludic practice as an operational register for digital creatives working in similar ways. Writing lives and experiences in these ways must

account for the knowing and not knowing of the posthuman condition and non-normative subjectivities and ontological immanence of posthumanism. In other words, the situated dailiness of networked realities which challenge the digital writer and symbolic order.

Violen)t Existence thematically engages users in various discussions of the posthuman condition and posthuman experiences. As evidence of postdigital ludic practice it destabilises normative categories, such as “writer”, “writing”, “human” and therefore the Literary Humanities not to subvert but to illustrate the complexities of the ongoing processes of becoming. It is a set of tools and methods that operate within the continuous present to articulate the experiences, thoughts and flows of becoming comprising of both known and unknown playful behaviours and practices, fragments of posthuman perception and polyphonic bodies to rupture traditional writing and reading. This is not to say that postdigital ludic practice becomes another abstract epistemological framework. Its terminological vitality acknowledges the agile, continually evolving affective contexts that structure the simultaneous over-exposure and disappearance of “human”. In this sense it is more than we can see, both actual and virtual, constructed by different relational subjects: writer, reader, machine.

The lexicon of terms used to determine and discern postdigital ludic practice are defined and applied in this project. Whilst the list of terms is not exhaustive, it is fluid and not mutually exclusive, it is designed to recognise that the literary terms associated with form, genre, “writing”, publishing, even “Literature” and the “Humanities” have acquired complex and at times negative connotations (Braidotti 2019). That is particularly in relation to power and status, in that their attempts to “make sense” establish a stable order or hierarchy; a stable order which does not apply in the contemporary posthuman context. Postdigital ludic practice attempts to articulate the authenticity of these pluralistic, chaotic realities through its openness to change and uncertainty; indeed, the technical aspects or techniques and their meanings might be “digital”, more than “digital” or not “digital” at all. Their meanings can and will change, reflecting the rapid pace of change in the technological contexts in which we exist.

They must also reflect the needs of the culture or social group who utilise them, so they are not meant to be restrictive and can be adapted and/ or hybridised.

The agility and dynamism of postdigital ludic practice is also recognised through the inclusion of “writing” experiments in the presentation of *Violen)t Existence*; to make the creative process visible through trials, drafts, rehearsal and various “digital” iterations. These processes are not hidden before you arrive at the final creative artefact or product, in fact it is difficult to perceive which is *the* creative output. The commitment to revealing and showcasing the creative processes affects its signifying systems and social relations, therefore affecting how the artefact(s) are interpreted. Firstly, they serve as a reminder that these “things” did not just happen and therefore destabilise the invisible, pervasive nature of “digital” practices and spaces. Secondly, there is no consensus between the various components of the creative outputs; by not “coming together” it breaks down binaries between online/published, creative practice/research, reality/virtual, print/digital and so on. In this regard, the process of postdigital ludic practice is also the product: making visible the process of writing, research and publishing including the “invisible” bits such as design, labour, dissemination, collaboration, editing, peer review. Arguably this thesis is limited by the fact that this toolkit emerges from the practices and experiences of one digital writer: I am limited by my own digital skills and knowledge, access to hardware and software and the financial means to engage with certain applications and time. However, as Skains (2023) argues the constraints of certain knowledge, skills and authoring tools can be frustrating but has also continued to inspire. This is precisely how postdigital ludic practice maintains an embodied connection with the material environment; it acknowledges its own contradictions and limitations as a form of hopeful resistance to the artificiality of “humanity”.

Postdigital Ludic Practice: Analytical Function

Postdigital ludic practice is an original contribution to knowledge as it moves beyond simply remediating creative writing practices in posthuman digital contexts and operates contemporaneously as an innovative critical framework for the purposeful reflection and analysis of these practices and contexts. When operationalised, postdigital ludic practice is

simultaneously a dynamic apparatus for the production of original, digital creative writing and, a theoretical framework for the critical reading of those practices and their outcomes. Through its transparent engagement with the dynamism and artificiality of our existence, postdigital ludic practice re-evaluates the meanings of and the inter-relationships between Art, Humanities and Cultural Studies; and is a discursive intervention in a techno-utopia. It is simultaneously process and product interrogating the performance of writing, reading and publishing in these contexts; a hybrid practice which simultaneously challenges and represents contextual threats.

Using inter- and multidisciplinary methods and approaches, this research seeks to extend the work of the New Humanities to devise and employ an emerging set of creative-critical hybrid tools and methods established from and within embedded and embodied practices, and consequently more substantially articulate the potentialities of the processes of becoming digital literatures, specifically digital poetry. These practices are designed to not just take place within Academia but recognise that knowledge is produced across a range of locations (Alaimo 2014), in this case networked communities made possible via the internet, and any affective response oscillates between cognition and imagination.

Digital writing published in this context becomes a collectively shared resource that operates amongst platforms, networks and frameworks at different speeds, within multi-nonlinear timescales and fuelled by different outcomes to that of “traditional” publishing: not capitalist, but socially, culturally and possibly politically motivated relational possibilities driven by multiple, contradictory, curiosity driven practices. Postdigital ludic practice articulates the tools and methods of digital writers who actively engage in new or different (not always economically driven) practices with the potential to catalyse transformative affects. Arguably, a digital text itself becomes its own body once “published” to the internet. This not only challenges traditional publishing models but considers the text(s) itself as a non-human body with its own potential, those that cannot be known, scripted, created nor controlled by the “writer”. This research therefore is also informed by artistic and activist modes and practices

which acknowledge the outcomes of academic endeavour, or “major science” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994), are at risk within the context of the posthuman condition.

Braidotti (2019) argues that hybrid critical and creative practices promote decentred subjectivities: they reject a wounded, tragic Eurocentric Anthropocene whilst also working with established hierarchies of knowledge. Postdigital ludic practice reconsiders existing creative practices and models of analysis, whilst working alongside frameworks of knowledge situated in the New Humanities including self-reflexive writing practice, material feminisms, ludology and postqueer theories. Whilst recognising that these frameworks are aligned and useful, it is argued that these existing models and approaches cannot fully grasp the polyvocal affective intensities of the posthuman voices, experiences, insights and knowledges just as affecting and “serious” as the writer or academic (Guattari 2000). Digital texts demonstrate the potential to create an assemblage of becomings engaging and connecting writers, readers – “humans” – and computers – “non-humans” – in the context of the posthuman condition. Applying postdigital ludic practice as an analytical tool enables the investigation of “writing” once disseminated on the internet: its “writers” and its networks; and, its potential to change shape, tone, form in directions not originally conceived. Whilst the Literary Humanities offers interpretations of “humanity” through various different social imaginaries and analyses of cultural representations developing empowering images and supporting social change (Braidotti 2019: 81), the processes of becoming digital poetry require more nuanced critical approaches.

In addition, this thesis could not ignore that digital literatures not only engage with computational networks but demand to be accessed via machines including portable smart devices. Arguably these technologies are deeply rooted in the capitalist system (Dean 2004) and therefore tether postdigital ludic practice to the shackles of the hierarchical symbolic order characterised by: endless commercialism and commodity fetishism (Wolfe 2009); deregulated, abused, ubiquitous “smart” objects which mediate our existence (Moulier-Boutang 2012); and, a neoliberal technocracy which is addictive and toxic, kills freedoms and threatens sustainability. This evidences where the social and technological converge, not a

simplistic observable binary: these technologies are neither good nor bad, both modalities exist and are not mutually exclusive. These affective outcomes defamiliarise cognitive and bodily realities.

The tools and methods offered in this thesis as postdigital ludic practice account for these multiple interconnected levels of knowledge and posthuman identifications and bodies. These hybrid practices do not work within binary frameworks and therefore help to examine the extent to which traditional hierarchies can be applied in the context of technological advances and continued social inequalities. Postdigital ludic practice is engaged in various socio-cultural transformations which destabilise existing binaries including human/ machine, print/ digital, real/ virtual, creative/critical. The purposeful integration of and experimentation with “digital” creativities and practices is a strategic, creative and physical process, which moves beyond self-awareness or self-reflexivity and demonstrates an authenticity: there is no one way to describe this “humanity”; and, the ever-increasing potential for new and multiple subjectivities creates a multi-dimensional paradox (Braidotti 2019). In doing so, it signals a significant shift in methods, ethics and relational openness which accounts for postdigital collaborations and therefore more accurately represents the material conditions and socio-cultural contexts of the posthuman existence.

Sustained engagement with postdigital ludic practice as a creative-critical hybrid methodology operates as a form of posthuman knowledge production (Braidotti 2019: 4-5). Rather than spiralling into panic and anxiety, it offers writers productive opportunities to engage with their posthuman, material realities and thus has the potential to (re)produce complex “zigzagging [...] pathways” of knowledges and frameworks which are embedded and embodied within and, have the power to affect the posthuman condition. These types of critical engagement are defined by Braidotti (2019) as functioning philosophies and discursive meta-patterns which engage with a range of posthumanisms and neo-humanist claims including postcolonialism and critical race theories, and queer theories. She claims that the forms and modes of posthuman knowledge production will afford humans, non-humans and indeed, the Humanities opportunities to reinvent themselves (2019: 4) being grounded in the processes

of becoming. These affective frameworks are innovative, interdisciplinary and persistent modes of working through unthinkable, unsustainable futures whilst also renewing the conventional Humanities. The potential of playful writing and reading within this context should not be perceived as yet another white, heterosexual masculine crisis within Literature, within the Humanities. This thesis does not seek to establish another critical investigation in the form of biased, hegemonic white panic (Morton 2013) which mishears, misunderstands and diminishes the complications of embedded and embodied materialisms (Latour 2017). It is a commitment to the complexities and challenges of multiscalar, transversal, trans-species and trans-corporeal systems and approaches (Braidotti 2019).

This thesis positions postdigital ludic practice as an example of these types of posthuman conceptual and methodological transformations, as it embraces and collaborates with non-humans including computational networks. Such radical shifts in methods, ethics and relational openness increases our capacity to make sense of the intensities of our world, which has the potential to enhance our power, and therefore take on the intolerable aspects of existence and resist (Braidotti 2019: 79). This is a vital outcome of active becoming.

Postdigital Ludic Practice as Postdisciplinary Practices of the Critical Posthumanities

As a theoretical framework, postdigital ludic practice accounts for the heterogeneous interconnected assemblages catalysed by the processes of becoming digital poetry dispersed amongst virtual and embodied relative and non-linear contexts. Therefore, it accepts that “poets”, “writers”, “readers”, publishers, the Humanities, Academia for example, cannot be the sole owners of knowledge production; it is infused with understanding the posthuman condition. Braidotti (2019: 90) calls this “affirmative collaborative ethics” operating within the postdisciplinary, relational fields of posthuman knowledge production. The “postdisciplinary” accounting for the impact of posthumanism on the function of the hierarchical systems of knowledge including the Humanities and Academia. Whilst these systems provide terms and metaphors, theories and methods, they lack adequate concepts and models for the rhizomatic movements and structures of posthumans to create digital literatures. Postdigital ludic practice acknowledges new forms of participation in the construction of knowledge including

those not “seen” by the Humanities. In this sense it is a minor science: not seeking serious credentials, working within new rhizomatic networks and economies including art, media, activisms, social and cultural movements, the “missing”. It is an open relational assemblage of becomings territorialised by capitalism but operating at different speeds with multiplicitous motivations with different ethical affects. It seeks to demonstrate the transformative potentialities of postdisciplinary transformations of critical posthumanities (Braidotti 2019), which continue to evolve at a pace quicker than Academia can keep up with, yet desires to actualise unprecedented modes of epistemic relations (Lykke 2011).

As a commitment to the postdisciplinary critical posthumanities, this project asserts that postdigital ludic practice is simultaneously a set of critical and creative tools: it can be utilised as a system of writing practices for digital writers; and, it can be deployed as a mode of analysing digital texts. Chapter four of this thesis demonstrates how postdigital ludic practice has been utilised as a theoretical experiment with the postdisciplinary critical posthumanities. To this effect, I operated the register of postdigital ludic practice as a framework for critical thinking to playfully engage with and interpret my own digital poetry. When applied in this way, the toolkit ensures that critical materialist attention is paid to the posthuman condition which contextualises the digital text(s) being analysed. Postdigital ludic practice when utilised as a critical toolkit is simultaneously comprised of its own dynamic tools and methods and the following established frameworks of knowledge:

- literary close readings;
- critical approaches and theories including but not limited to poststructuralisms, feminisms, queer and postqueer to identify political relational dynamics of power and the real-life effects on subjects;
- new media approaches to structural anthropocentrism whilst recognising its inadequate accounts of the media-nature-culture continuum (Parikka 2015).
- embodied multiple affective realities and discursive productions of humans and non-humans;
- activism, significant artistic phenomenon which inherently challenge “art”;
- new contributions to knowledge not previously “seen” by the Humanities; and,

- the multiple rhizomatic assemblages of minor nomadic sciences (Stimpson 2016).

Therefore, postdigital ludic practice is a plurality of critical and methodological approaches, forming associations with multiple polyvocal subjectivities and seeking to account for the embodied and embedded realities of the posthuman condition. Postdigital ludic practice recognises that the material conditions of posthumanism may not be adequately expressed through linguistic constructions and significations and therefore it seeks to represent itself as a form of activist strategies and interventions. This is precisely why chapter four is presented as a lyric essay rather than a traditional thesis discussion chapter. The lyric essay segues between stream of consciousness, poetry, nonfiction and personal essay; it distils ideas through the shape and musicality of language whilst also engaging with “objectivity” (Sulak and Kolosov 2015). As *Violen)t Existence* engages with dislocated, fragmented selves it seemed apposite to consider the act or performance of me as credible “researcher”, “critic” or “academic” as also dislocated and fragmented, indeed poems in the collection explicitly explore my Imposter Syndrome. The lyric essay form understands that insight and interpretation is not always linear and at times can be too large to grasp, similarly to the work of Claudia Rankine and Anne Carson. I mentioned commonplacing earlier and Sulak and Kolosov acknowledge these types of journals as the “forerunner for today’s lyric essay” (2015: 3).

Need-less-to-say, as another component of *Violen)t Existence*, the lyric essay as the fourth chapter of this thesis continues to perform embodied posthuman identities and manifestations, thus questioning logical “human” truths, arguments and conclusions. The lyric essay in this thesis explores the potential of concrete poetry, line length and separations, white space to offer contradictory and recursive discussions and “findings”. Although slippery and fragmented, the lyric essay works within the networked iterations of *Violen)t Existence* and so therefore shares its structural properties. Chapter four therefore positions itself as another dimension of *Violen)t Existence* being read on the page but also accessible in fragments as part of the digital text; another rhizome in the processes of becoming digital poetry.

This research argues that postdigital ludic practice has the potential to account for alternative collective forms of knowledge production, not always seen as “research”. Presented in a creative format, postdigital ludic practice adopts a relational and open approach to institutionalised critical practices and discourses: it is simultaneously a creative and critical toolkit which catalyses the potential to create heterogenous assemblages, the processes of becoming digital poetry. As a postdisciplinary approach to the critical posthumanities, it has the potential to actualise unprecedented modes of epistemic relations and the affective negotiations, contestations and potentialities of bodies; the embodied selves of digital writers and users and the non-humans always present. This research considers postdigital ludic practice as a transformative posthuman “we” (Todd 2016; Wu et al. 2018) with the transformative potential to catalyse *jouissance*.

This research considers the potential of *jouissance* (Barthes 1975) to capture the failures of the linguistic order and hermeneutics and thus more precisely engage with the relational assemblage of postdigital ludic practice including its multiple and paradoxical affects and “fleshy frequencies” (Dernikos 2020). *Jouissance* (Barthes 1975) blurs the boundaries between pleasure and pain, just as postdigital ludic practice blurs the boundaries between the affective traumas of a the posthuman condition whilst offering new creative “freedoms” and modes of resistance. The terminological agility of postdigital ludic practice represents the chaos of frenetic, perpetually shifting systems and the excitement and exasperation this acceleration can trigger. Arguably mirroring Wolfe’s (2010) definition of posthumanism, *jouissance* is beyond “pleasure”, engaging in the unsettling and radical to create and stimulate. In doing so it attempts to avoid reinscribing humanist values and traditions as posited by Žižek (2014) in his critique of new feminist materialisms. As posthumans alternate between excitement and doom, their affective responses call for new affective languages in scholarship (Braidotti 2019: 81). For this research, *jouissance* is not simply literary pleasure or bliss (Barthes 1970) but an assemblage of known and unknown affective materialities, languages, cognitive abilities and imaginations with the potential to resist writing and scholarship which focusses on the anxiety and despair of the posthuman condition and celebrates a “new”, pluralistic humanity.

As a toolkit for the postdisciplinary practices of the critical posthumanities, postdigital ludic practice is a system of theoretically-powered tools and methods for writing and reading the conceptual oddities of digital literatures which operate within various affecting contexts. Ultimately this research seeks to challenge the self-reverential practices and arrogance of the dominant Humanities and open up new perspectives (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018). It positions postdigital ludic practice as a hybrid creative-critical toolkit which (re)produces multiple, relational and at times contradictory rhizomes of knowledge accounting for the embedded and embodied realities of posthumanism with the power to affect and be affected.

Summary and Chapter Overview

I realise there are a lot of “posts” being discussed here, yet I think these are useful to capture the dynamism and chaos of the socio-cultural contexts being explored; where “post” is tied to conceptual and methodological (re)invention and transformation in order to capture the real struggles of lived realities and endeavours in an ever-increasingly incoherent, confusing and destabilising existence (Jordan and Lutostański 2024) .

In summary, the thesis presents the following original contributions to knowledge:

- an operational hybrid creative-critical toolkit for digital writers, defined as **postdigital ludic practice**;
- the application of this new toolkit to create original multimodal poetry, as evidenced by ***Viole(n)t Existence*** which is comprised of the traditional print publication, *Violet Existence*, and various multimodal iterations accessed via the website;
- the application of this new toolkit as a critical approach to assess the potentialities of this form of digital writing to catalyse posthuman transformations; and
- by presenting the thesis as an original hybrid of critical-creative postdigital digital ludic writing itself, it productively engages with the transformational practices and processes of the postdisciplinary critical posthumanities.

The project is presented in three sections:

1. The first third of the thesis functions as standard within the field of Literary Studies and Creative Writing and comprises:
 - a. firstly, a Literature Review which contextualises the history and development of digital literatures and ludic cultures; and,
 - b. secondly, a Methodology which provides the rationale for and critical reflections on my writing experiments;
 - c. as a result, a rationale for the development of an operational register for the tools and methods of digital writing, that is postdigital ludic practice, is defined and positioned as extending the existing research in the field of digital literatures.
2. The second third is a practice-led research output comprised of my original multimodal digital poetry project which can be accessed via a website and is entitled, *Violen)t Existence*. These digital poems form a relational network with the published and reviewed pamphlet of “traditional” poems, *Violet Existence* and the digital communities which interact with its iterations.
3. The final third functions to evidence:
 - a. an extension of the creative work by presenting the discussion chapter as a lyric essay becoming another element of the relational network postdigital ludic practice creates (it is both form and content);
 - b. the critical functions of postdigital ludic practice operationalised as a framework for the critical posthumanities; and,
 - c. the examination of the transformative posthuman potentialities of postdigital ludic practice.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to identify the key historical milestones in the development of digital literatures. It also pays attention to the key critical concepts and theoretical approaches that have been utilised to analyse not only their literariness, but their potential (for authors and readers) within the context of an ever-increasingly digital world. This chapter will explore the definitions associated with the hybrid and interactive nature of digital literatures; definitions which evidently determine this as a multidisciplinary field. The implications of these definitions are integral to understanding the modes of writing and reading such texts in order to present an effective model for creating and analysing them. This is the model that is offered in the later chapters of this thesis as postdigital ludic practice. This chapter establishes the value and topical nature of research in digital literatures, notably the technologies which inform them, and the human dynamics associated with their production, distribution and reception. This thesis pays careful attention to the use of the plural *literatures* as opposed to *Literature* in order to acknowledge the democratising potential of *digital literatures* which creates space within Literature for both writers and readers.

The field of digital literatures recognises the transformation of literary expression in the digital age; literary expression which emerged as a response to developments in computer science and eventually the internet. This literary expression no longer exists in a “cyberspace” separate to our “real world”. This field acknowledges, as many fields within the contemporary New Humanities do, that our everyday culture is digital, and our “reality” is mediated through the Internet of Things (Braidotti 2019). These fields continue to draw attention to the rapid pace at which these technologies modify and shape our lives operationalising established concepts and theories from the fields of media studies, literature and computer science. As “prosumers” within this culture (Toffler 1980), simultaneously producers and consumers of these cultural experiences, it is of course necessary to continue to develop our understanding of the way in which these behaviours shape creative practice and expression. Significantly, literature has transformed, existing not only on paper or in “analogue” (Adema et al. 2024) but is also afforded the opportunities to manifest as code, with textual implications as well as visual and aural aspects. These types of transformations continue to also progress at a rapid

rate as hyperlinks, sound and music, graphics, animation continue to evolve, mutate and hybridise. Integral to this thesis is the recognition of the digital apparatus, skills and knowledge which are utilised to both construct, interpret and interact with these digital literatures (Skains 2023).

Digital Literatures: The Development of a Recognisable Discipline

Digital literatures is most definitely a recognisable discipline, connected historically to the academic interest in “electronic literature” (Emerson 2014) and to the developments, advantages and disadvantages of digital media. There are numerous research groups across the world engaged in this field including Digital Digital Digital Littérature (DDDL in France), Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP in Norway), Poetry in the Digital Age (Germany), and, the American-based, Electronic Literature Organization (ELO). The ELO is extremely prevalent in the space, running annual conferences and publishing digital collections alongside activities which develop and endorse the reading, writing, teaching and appreciation of these digital literatures as they continue to develop in multiple, continually changing digital landscapes. Therefore, the question of whether digital literatures exists or indeed whether literature can be digital is no longer a consideration: digital literatures exist, and they are to be taken seriously. Indeed, this pursuit is arguably even more pertinent in a contemporary cultural context which continues to engage with and be augmented by immersive technologies and mixed realities. Thus, the connection between digital technologies, its tools and techniques, and modes of reading and writing is one which is not only notable but pervasive and impossible to ignore.

Traditional models of literary analysis have been utilised effectively as modes of critical engagement evaluating not only the changing shape but also changing purpose of the literary text in the digital age. As cultural expression, digital literatures has often brought a renewed interest and understanding of literary theories and criticism through its challenge to “literary” modalities including the visual, kinetic and kinaesthetic. The early scepticism associated with the early application of traditional, analogue theoretical models is in the past; since 1999 when the ELO was formed, literature that is “born-digital” (ELO n.d. online) is literary and

worthy of academic attention. It is worth noting that the field originally overlooked and at times excluded print literature which was simply digitised (Hayles 2008: 3). Digital literatures are those which are required to be digital: their form is undoubtedly digital where literary aspects manipulate and exploit the capabilities, contexts and advantages provided by the computer. Today, the field also recognises the importance and value of *networked* computers and the portability and immediacy of smart devices; an understanding of which is informed by game studies, film studies, animation digital arts, graphic design and (electronic) visual cultures. The exploration and investigation of digital literatures therefore includes the following creative outcomes:

- Hypertext fiction and poetry, on and off the web
- Kinetic poetry
- Computer art installations
- Chatterbots
- Interactive fiction
- Social media novels which include emails, messages and blogs
- Poems and stories generated by computer algorithms
- Collaborative writing projects
- online performances.

The First Wave of Digital Literatures: Hypertext

One of the oldest genres of digital literatures is computational or digital poetry (Rettberg 2019: 20). Christopher Strachey's, *Love Letters* generator (1952) is often cited: a simple combinatory algorithm operating via the Manchester Ferranti Mark 1 computer (the first stored program digital computer) which drew on 70 words meaning that approximately 3000 billion love letters could be produced; a landmark in computer science as well as literature, demonstrating how the computer could store and potentially modify its own instructions and data. European digital poetic experimentation was incredibly productive: for example, the work of Francois de Lionnais and Raymond Queneau and the group the Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle (OULIPO) in 1960; and, E. M. de Melo e Castro's video poetry in the 1960s and computer

poetry in 1975. These developments in computer science and creative expression helped to birth what is now often referred to as the first wave of digital literature: hypertext.

Hypertext (first coined by Nelson in the 1960s) is a form of literature published to digital spaces from the early 1990s-early 2000s which utilised specific software packages to create an interactive text composed of overt and covert text and image hyperlinks (Ensslin 2014), or nodes and lexia, accessed via CD Rom (Bolter 1991; Moulthrop 1991; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Juul 2005). Hypertext utilised the codes and programs of these software packages to create a digital text and space that users were free to explore; that is to say, to navigate their own unique pathway through the text as they discovered various hyperlinks by the movement and click of the mouse they operated. In this sense, hypertexts create different “reading” experiences every time the text is accessed; therefore, the text cannot be furnished with an “ending”, it ends when the interactive “reading” session ends. Arguably, the user becomes a part of the text and its potential; hypertext is polysemic and users must determine their own meanings from them derived from their individual “reading” experiences. In conducting any close reading of digital poetry it is necessary to pay attention to Hayles’ concept of the “flickering signifier”: in the digital space a signifier can no longer be understood to have one signified rather it “exists as a flexible chain of markers bound together by the arbitrary relations specified by the relevant codes” (1999: 31).

It is clear why a poststructuralist lens was adopted by literary scholars initially to make sense of this literary and technological intersect; namely, Barthes’ “ideal text” (1970), Levi-Strauss’ bricolage (1966) and Derrida’s (1979) deconstruction and intertextuality. Discussions and debates included: how hypertext could never replicate nor replace the experience of reading a physical book; the literariness of these types of (media) text, recognising their similarities with some printed literature (for example, B.S Johnson’s, *The Unfortunates* (1969)); the appearance of concrete evidence of obtuse poststructuralist theory; whilst not accounting for the fact that fundamentally writers and readers did not have easy access to the hardware and software required to produce and interact with such texts (such as web browsers or the programme, Storyspace). The seminal work of George Landow (2006) provides a very good account of both the advantages and disadvantages of this mode of digital writing, offering

discussions from both an academic and writerly position. *Hypertext* of which there are three iterations (Landow 1992, 1997, 2006) offers critical insight into the form and functionality of hypertext and how this affects the writer-reader dynamic, whilst also making a case for its literariness.

There is a particularly useful discussion in Chapter 1 of Landow's *Hypertext 3.0* (2006) about the difference between the terms *interactive* and *ergodic* when discussing electronic, literary media (2006: 41-42). *Ergodic* recognises that hypertext textuality demands exploration and navigation, together with interpretation (Aarseth 1997; Ryan 1999), whilst *interactive* recognises that users have the power to intervene in processes while they occur, rather than simply power to produce effect (Montfort 2003). Landow interrogates the work of Espen J. J. Aarseth (1997) to explain why *ergodic* may be a more appropriate term when discussing user engagement, as it derives from the Greek *ergon* and *hodos* meaning "work" and "path", implying "the non-trivial effort required to enable users to traverse the text" (Landow 2006: 42). Indeed, Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) is also considered seminal in this period of hypertext literature, demonstrated by the widespread acceptance of the term *ergodic*, which has also been valuable to the study of computer games. The distinction between *interactive* and *ergodic*, however, remains problematic, as even in the 2006 version of Landow's text and in relation to literary gaming, both terms seem to have their uses.

Landow draws particular attention to the open textuality of the form characterised through the application of post-structuralist theories which identifies hypertext as an intertextual (2006: 55), decentred (2006: 56), rhizomatic system (2006: 58). Landow claims hypertext embodies Barthes' notion of the "writerly text" (1970, cited in Landow 2006: 53) and mirrors Derrida's concept, "assemblage" (1979 cited in Landow 2006: 54) as it is comprised of simultaneous multi-linear pathways chosen by the user. Hypertext users interact with interweaving webs of meaning, which come together but also re-separate; users not only follow their own pathway through texts, but become part of an alternative semiotic structure (Bernstein 1999; Frasca 2003) which accommodates multivocal consciousness (Sloane 2000: 12). This is an important insight for this research as it recognises a potential, yet seemingly unknowable and unpredictable connection between the author, and the pathways within the

text made possible by computers and users. This connection reconfigures our perception of the machine which in this sense, connects authors to the individual desires and motivations of their readers. This will be discussed further in the next chapter of this thesis: whilst offering a discussion of the social and political context, I will consider the juxtaposing arguments for technology as liberating “play” and those which consider technology as indelibly connected to the exploitative behaviours and practices of neo-liberal market capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2001; Dean 2009).

The Second and Third Waves of Digital Literatures: Hypermedia and Transmedia Storytelling

Although hypertext did not make it “mainstream” (by which I mean to a popular audience for everyday consumption) this type of writing did not disappear, indeed the form was greatly influenced by the democratisation of the internet, the invention of the world wide web and, the exponential rise in the popularity of video games: their design, composition and user experience. This saw the next development of this literary form, hypermedia: a multimedia, audio-visual hypertext structure composed of hyperlinks, still and moving images and soundscapes (Ensslin 2014). This wave of research recognised its ever-changing multimodal nature combined with changes in contextual conditions affecting access and discovery, determining that no one way of reading digital media could be possible: hypermedia had polysemic potential.

Research in the field of digital literatures also had to pay diligent attention to key developments in the form that were directly related to the development of lightweight server-based applications that move rich data across platforms, often referred to as Web 2.0 (O’Reilly 2005); those which also engineered the tools for an emerging participatory web in the early 2000s. These developments created the conditions for a convergence culture where web content flowed across multiple platforms and required active participation (Jenkins 2006). It also led to the development of social media platforms and increased user generated content. These developments are evident in contemporary examples of hypermedia texts, where integral narrative elements now also spread across multiple participatory platforms. This was referred to as the “third generation” of digital literatures (Flores 2018) and is often discussed

alongside transmedia storytelling; a concept initially defined by Jenkins (2006) and one which continues to be examined by scholars such as Bacon (2021).

Digital Poetry

Central to the inspiration and direction of this thesis was seminal work in the specific field of new media poetry or digital poetry; in particular the modes which evolved as a type of hypermedia, yet also precisely engaged with the structures and conventions of poetry, as opposed to narrative fiction. During my Master's programme, I developed my interest in digital poetry as I combined my creative practice as a poet, with my academic critical practice as a scholar for the first time. In doing so, I was recommended Glazier's, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (2002): one of the earliest monographs published in the field of digital poetry. Building on the record and traditions of concrete poetry, Glazier alongside Kac (1996) and Funkhouser (2007), provide a detailed history of and seek validation for the form. I wondered at this time whether "traditional", Canonical poetry would require such extensive restating and historical contextualisation within the broader movements of digital literatures and contemporary cultural shifts and genres.

Both Ensslin (2006) and Braidotti (2019) have noted the traditionally static conceptualisation of a "Literary [Western] Canon" whereby certain literary works are considered exemplary, timeless and are selected by institutional authorities to reinforce certain traditions and tastes, with the effect of prioritising an elitist worldview where Literature creates and sustains particular identities with considerable psychological and socialising effects. The recent agenda to "decolonise" the Canon reflects the potential for the Canon to change as marginalised communities seek to challenge past representations which have actively mis-represented their experiences and served as further latent acts of oppression (Braidotti 2019). Indeed, the historicisation of the Canon reveals it to be dynamic being comprised of significant paradigm shifts, for example the inclusion of the novel in the 19th and early 20th Century. Canonisation is evolutionary (Ensslin 2006) but the processes slow (Braidotti 2019): although existing for more than 30 years, digital poetry is yet to enter "mainstream" literary discourses occupying a liminal position between "paper" poetry written by poets and digital art made by digital

media practitioners (McCray 2021). Despite the acknowledgement of writing adaptations in digital contexts, writing in and for this media have not been adopted main scale. Even in my own institution English Literature appears to stop with postmodernism. To reiterate, the process is slow: English Literary Studies is arguably only just becoming more curious, potentially more accepting of digital poetry most likely due to the technological revolution as discussed in relation to the posthuman condition (Braidotti 2019) which was defined in the previous chapter and, the recent interest in the Creative Industries⁴.

However, the following published works have acknowledged digital poetry's contribution to the established cultural genre more broadly that being digital literatures: Bolter's (2001) *Writing Space*; Hayle's (2008) *Electronic Literature*; Kac's (2007) *Media Poetry, An International Anthology*; Simanowski's (2011) *Digital Art and Meaning: Reading Kinetic Poetry, Text Machines, Mapping art, and Interactive Installations*; Mencia's (2017) *#WomenTechLit*; Rettberg's (2019) *Electronic Literature*; and, O'Sullivan's (2019) *Towards a Digital Poetics: Electronic Literature & Literary Games*. This catalogue acknowledges changes in shape and form reflecting not only its poetic or literary functions, but also the conditions of the contemporary cultural zeitgeist. Arguably, poetry is the most visceral of all the literary forms: undeniably entwined with articulating the human condition. Thus, its form often more innovative and agile with purpose, function and its appropriation of language. Paul de Man (cited in Brower 1970) reminds us of Yeats' belief that poetry utilises language as a conscious expression of conflict with the functions of language to represent the self and this is also seen in the work of symbolist poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé. Indeed, de Melo e Castro argues in the early part of his discussion on videopoetry:

“Poetry is always on the limit of things. On the limit of what can be said, of what can be written, of what can be seen, even of what can be thought, felt and understood [...] Beyond the frontier of what we are prepared to accept as being possible”

(1996: 140).

⁴ The reference to the Creative Industries here includes recent and renewed “interest” in the broad fields of media studies, journalism, drama and film for example, as evidenced by Government investment plans, media attention and, educational policymaking, particularly in the context of Higher Education in the UK, for example.

A passion for poetry is integral to this thesis, and a desire to encourage and reinvigorate poetry for groups of people outside of academic scholarship and literary traditions whilst simultaneously challenging the stereotypical tropes associated with “women’s writing”⁵. That is to say, a motivation not to forget the traditions of the Literary Canon, but to utilise them whilst resisting them in order to better make sense of the often anarchic, chaotic experience of today’s contemporary existence; and, to make these expressions more accessible, outside of formal print convention and practice.

Landow, cites Bush when he articulates the important relationship between poetry and machines: “[machines work] according to analogy and association [...they] capture and create the anarchic brilliance of human imagination” (2006: 13). This is important for this thesis as it recognises that the “digital” element of the poetry is not merely a means or vehicle for communication, a medium, but is inherently and symbiotically associated with the manner and conditions in which it is conceived and perceived. It is not simply the intersection between computer science and poetry that I’m interested in, but the inextricably and intimately linked relationship between machines and humans within the context of the digital age; a relationship which is not speculative nor science-fiction, but a fundamental reality of human existence today (Braidotti 2019).

Writers of digital literatures continued to experiment with digital combinations of kinetic and concrete poetry, code, user interactivity (mouse clicks, typing commands, integrating tools to measure bodily responses), the construction and blurring of 2D and 3D spaces, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its mechanics (Hayles 2007), whilst also working with the rules and expectations of the traditional literary “game”. Ensslin provides a detailed account of the development of the genre and defines various forms of “literary game”, which is succinctly defined thus:

⁵ “Women’s Writing” is a literary category which examines the relationship between gender and writing; thus the writing is traditionally perceived and determined by its relationship to a socially constructed subject formation (Dodds and Dowd 2025). My writing seeks to explode these expectations and assumptions by recognising “woman” and “writing” as shaped by my own social, cultural, political and literary relationships.

“games that exhibit specific ludic mechanics and implement them through digital technologies. These ludic mechanics can either be embedded in a (digital-born) literary work or form the basis of an art game featuring literary (poetic, narrative, or dramatic) structures and strategies. [...] It is only recently, with the evolution of digital media as a platform for artistic and creative experimentation, that true literary-ludic hybridity has begun to flourish and proliferate [...]”

(2014: 32-33).

There is no question that writers and readers (or “users”) have adapted quickly to the continually shifting digital landscape, applying playful methods to make sense of each of their on-screen interactions (Ensslin 2014). Digital literatures are by their nature adaptive and agile due to the code which enables the creation of, access to and interaction with the text; code which continues to develop and mutate, manifesting as various softwares and platforms. This has sometimes meant that the form of digital literature has become known only by a software or platform; for example, Instapoetry. This is problematic because the history of digital literatures demonstrates that a form identified by the software that produced it can become dormant if the software is no longer available such as Adobe Flash content. The speed of change in digital technologies fundamentally changes the terms of reference used to describe the forms these digital literatures can take. Naji (2021: 17) provides a useful example in her discussion of digital poetry where she lists terms of reference all used to discuss “digital poetry”: text generators, hypertext poetry, automatic poems, visual poems, video text, kinetic concrete poetry, digital videopoems, animated poems, interactive kinetic poetry.

These technological changes also affect the ways in which the digital text “performs”. In her discussion of digital poetry, Hayles (2006: 181-186) acknowledges how various software and hardware factors determine the process of interacting with the text and, therefore concludes that variations in that process are inevitable. This is significantly different to the way a print poem performs in that although there is a creative process behind the poem, once the poem is published, its materiality does not change (Hayles 2006: 183); there is only one path to the poem. Yet a digital poem will always rely on the programs it runs through, thus there is the

potential for a variety of different experiences of that one poem; indeed, there cannot be one poem, but varieties of it (Aarseth 1997: 3). That is to say, the pathways to and through the poem differ depending on each user's experiences, not just in an ontological sense but in relation to the material conditions of access (for example, stable wi-fi connection, or device lag; access on desktop versus on mobile device). Digital poems are comprised of programmed elements, coded in a variety of forms which represent its hybrid nature of course but also notably, its mutability. Not only this but the multimodality of digital poetry also destabilises the power the written word itself, by drawing attention to arresting audiovisual stimuli, which may transform what users think they know and understand about how language and "poetry" operates. These textual transformations and interventions might be surprising, challenging and provocative; they exist on a continuum of copresentation (Funkhouser 2007: 223) and are inherently polysemic.

This can be linked to Shanmugapriya et al.'s (2019) application of the term "paratext" (Genette 1997) to describe how the digital components of a digital literary text create different and multiple literary ecosystems more easily identifiable than those existing within traditional literary texts. Users must move between these literary ecosystems to make sense of the text but in doing so may also discover even more pathways and surprising elements; audiovisual elements which may not be copresent at the same time. To my mind, then, the existing term "kinetic poetry" (which is often used to define digital poetry) does not account for this specific type of movement. "Kinetic poetry" accounts for moving visual effects, suggesting that all components of digital poetry move, which is not the case. Some aspects of digital poetry could be printed and not move; it would still be poetry, but would it be digital? A poem can be typed using Microsoft Word; is that "digital poetry"? If it does not move on screen, possibly it then fails to make use of the technological capabilities of the machine, not exploiting the full functionality of the medium and, so consequently is not digital poetry at all. Yet, the machine does enable the architecture of and the movement between the paratextual literary ecosystems which exist within the digital poem and exploits the digital capabilities of the medium. In this sense, "kinetic poetry" does not account precisely for these types of movement: the dynamic aspects of a digital poem's internal structures and sequences; that is the innovative aspects of its DNA which provoke and enable users to move, to navigate and

meander through the digital poem as if accessing different literary territories whilst making new discoveries each time the poem is accessed.

Naji (2021: 19) argues that to describe digital poetry as “interactive” is a tautology, as digital poetry by its nature is created and operated through the digital medium which is interactive. In Aarseth’s (cited in Yellowlees Douglas 2004: 4) original appraisal of hypertexts, he argues that they are thematically unknown in advance even to the author. By their nature digital poems are constructed to disorient, demanding user participation in the text. This is why this thesis is particularly interested in playful participation, rather than “interactivity” without seeking to define the form further and simply add to the already critical discussions of its definition, which seem encumbered with the task of justification and defence of its existence and value and, are therefore questionably limited and reductive. Thus, it is important for this thesis to recognise that digital poetry is a playful experience, transforming a user’s participation in and expectations of literary ecosystems through its form and structure.

Digital Poetry, Games and Play

It is also important to distinguish between games and play beyond the seminal work of Huizinga (1992, 1938) and Caillois (2001, first published in 1961) which is often critiqued for being obtusely verbose, preventing academics from purposefully and productively utilising their critical frameworks to assess real world contexts. Yet this research values Huizinga’s (1992, first published in 1938: 11) claims that playfulness is fundamental to civilisation; whilst engaged in play the boundaries between humans and animals, or culture and nature are interweaving. Play is often thought of as inextricably connected to discourses of progress and power, the self and the imaginary and fate and fun (Sutton-Smith 1997: 9-11). This demonstrates its social and cultural pervasiveness and potential, whilst being difficult to distinctly define. Sutton-Smith (1997) provides a useful account of a variety of play forms that evade clear definition and categorisation. Most useful for this research is his conclusion that play is inconclusive, nebulous and ambiguous in all aspects: its characteristics, purpose, sensations, significance and interpretations; also its liminality, of being “between” play states.

These forms are further complicated by “players” who also perform various social and cultural roles.

Ask (2016) recognises that play and games are not new, but renewed interest and re-evaluation have now become important. Video game play is one of the fastest growing forms of multimedia entertainment in the world, and many adolescents play games for multiple hours each day (Gentile 2009). Despite their popularity, much of the research examining game use from the fields of developmental and social psychology have focussed mainly on the association with negative behaviours such as aggression, and addictive behaviour (Anderson et al. 2010; Bushman and Gibson 2011). This rather technologically deterministic approach, coupled with the limited research on positive outcomes, often only in relation to modes of cathartic behaviour, is surprising considering the importance that should be placed on understanding how users interact with games and what place games have in our everyday lives. Gaming is indeed a significant cultural phenomenon, which moves beyond the stereotyped notion of hardcore gamers (Ask 2016).

Ask (2016) offers a useful and succinct distinction between gaming and play: gaming activities as associated with and defined by rules and goals; whereas play has more freedom (Ask 2016). Zimmerman’s chapter in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (edited by Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004) also offers a useful distinction: “game play is a particular kind of ludic activity and ludic activities are a particular way of being playful” (159). Since the 1960s, the term “ludic” has been applied to playful behaviour and playfulness and is often used within the context of gaming (Raessens 2010). There is also a notable difference between gamification and ludification. Gamification applies game mechanics to non-game behaviours (Deterding et al. 2011) and drives or motivates certain behaviours by way of earning points or rewards; it is goal-oriented (Denny 2013; Hamari et al. 2014). Ludification involves incorporating playfulness and game structures into cultural experiences which typically exist without game content; this creates a more engaging and imaginative narrative and user experience, focussing on the process and atmosphere of play rather than extrinsic reward (Zimmerman 2015).

While the notion of gameplay certainly precedes digital gaming, and there is precedent for the application of a range of playful techniques in non-digital platforms and structures in literature such as in Jorge Luis Borges' *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941), this thesis acknowledges that contemporary users are immersed in a digital ludic culture and, that this context is crucial to understanding the very specific conditions and processes associated with the creation of and engagement with digital poetry. Explicitly, the skills that contemporary users associate with gameplay can be utilised in the creative and interpretative processes of digital poetry. This research positions itself alongside the research on play which is not only interested in players and playful activities but the role of digital media and non-human agents to extend and modify play behaviours and (re)structure playful contexts and functions (Deterding et al. 2011; Raessens 2006, 2010, 2014; Zimmerman 2015).

Smart technologies and the internet have also helped to construct a "ludic age" (Zimmerman 2015), an age where forms of electronic literature have entered the mainstream consciousness. This manifests itself perhaps most overtly through the generation of playful identities online through social media content creation (Raessens 2006). These behaviours draw attention to playfulness and playful behaviour as significant cultural phenomena, valuing creativity and innovation as formative experiences. Thus, play processes and atmospheres have intrinsic merits.

There is clear precedent for applying ludological – as well as literary – criticism to the study of hypermedia texts including digital poetry (Ciccoricco 2007a, 2007b; Bell 2010; Bell et al. 2010; Ryan and Costello 2012; Tosca 2014). Ensslin's (2014) text, *Literary Gaming* was the first to systematically study the interface between literary (poetic, dramatic, narrative) computer games and ludic electronic literature. She draws on previous work in the field including: electronic literature (Hayles 2008; Schafer and Gendolla 2011); kinetic poetry and new media poetics (Simoanowski 2011); game narratives and digital performance (Ryan 2006; Ricardo 2009); and game writing (Clarke and Mitchell 2007). Indeed, Ensslin suggests the literary gaming model offers a systematic method for analysing contemporary examples, which she defines as digital "literary-ludic" texts (2014: 2-4).

This research considers the playful, innovative composition, or “ludic mechanics” (Ensslin 2014: 11-12) of literary-ludic texts, drawing also upon and extending the work of digital narratologist, Ryan (2006) to assess the potentialities afforded to both writers and their readership when engaged in such playful activities. That is to say, the digital poem may be defined by a set of “rules”, those being its literary and digital components which are created by the digital creative and engineers a playful space, opportunities and experiences for the user. Yet users are self-directed: they have the agency to move through the various literary ecosystems within the text and arrive at different fragments in different sequences and at different times in different contextual conditions (i.e. the conditions of digitised access) as compared to other users. This type of engagement differs to that of a typical “reader” in that users are required to play not simply to consume: in order to discover the textual ecosystems within the digital poem users are motivated to complete specific tasks, such as clicking hyperlinks and buttons to activate dynamic multimodal components. This thesis considers the open, unstructured and spontaneous nature of user engagement as examples of ludic activities, including simultaneous kinetic and cognitive interactions with texts, defined by Ensslin as “cognitive-ergodic ludicity” (2014: 11).

These are behaviours and experiences that traditional “readers” may not typically expect from poetry. In their discussion of video gaming, Olson et al. (2008) acknowledge that adolescents have reported that their motivation stems from exciting and challenging game content, being forced to adapt to new challenges and modify game play strategically in order to overcome these. This thesis argues that this also applies to digital poetry: users adapt and modify their forms of play in order to “make sense” of the text. When deployed as a pedagogical method, video games have the potential to alter students’ own self-perception as it recognises and assigns value to their interest in gaming within the wider ludic cultural context (Loras 2017). This applies to the potential of digital poetry in that users *will* recognise and expect the ludic mechanics operating within the text as a result of their ludic culture and, are therefore able to utilise their ludic skills and knowledge to productively engage with the text. In fact, the digital poem creates a safe and familiar ludic space where users are engaged in ludic activities without judgment: they play how and when they want; to “make sense” of the text, but to also play for playful sake; and thus develop a positive self-perception. They are not bound by the rules and barriers associated with traditional literary analysis and close reading, nor the

out-dated stigma attached to games and play. This research investigates the transformative potential of these playful phenomena within the context of digital poetry, hypothesising that both writers and users are liberated to perform and negotiate polysemic notions of self both consciously, through ludic engagement with specific literary and digital devices and themes, and unconsciously as they relish the opportunity to play without intention, aim or objective.

Whilst it is argued that reading a book can be interactive, it does not direct specific cognitive challenges, rather it mediates incidental learning experiences (Coates Nee and Dozier 2015). In contrast, a video game is a problem-solving task that requires planning, collecting and synthesising information and actions thus it improves abstract reasoning, pattern recognition and spatial logic (Suziedelyte 2015). It is also widely accepted that media activities and technologies can contribute to the development of cognitive skills useful for attainment (Fiorini and Keane 2014) and that computer use specifically can foster verbal and non-verbal intelligence (Fiorini 2010; Malamud and Pop-Eleches 2011; Beuermann et al. 2013). This “learning by doing”, or experiential method, has also proven successful with mature users who, in research by Leask (2009) and Pillay and James (2013), by using games, were able to develop their self-awareness, collaborative working and decision-making skills. Johnson (2005) argues that these abilities chime with what has been defined as fluid intelligence (Cattell 1971), involving both inductive and deductive reasoning, arguing that video gaming is therefore more cognitively challenging than most computer activities. This thesis asserts that ludic engagement with digital poetry also creates these cognitive outcomes: it operates as a problem-solving task that requires and fosters fluid intelligence. This thesis also draws a connection to the conclusions offered by Matsushita (2018) when discussing play in a pedagogical context, in that these types of ludic reading strategies move past deep learning to deep *active* learning. That is to say, the users of digital poetry are involved in higher-order thinking, emphasising the internalisation and externalisation – that is the making use of – knowledge rather than simply acquiring it. It is clear, then, that the ludic activities associated with the creation of and engagement with digital poetry entail more than simply navigating through steps or playing by literary rules; the dynamic and mutable nature of digital poetry as described earlier in this chapter determines that users are encouraged to be creative and productive with the “reading” process which is mobilised by their ludic activities.

Contrastingly, another way of considering these literary ecosystems is through the postmodern lens of simulation: digital poetry is created by a computer therefore it manifests as a form of simulated immersive representation (Baudrillard 1981). In other words, users become “wrapped up in” or seduced by the digital text (Darley 2000: 165). Yet this chapter has already established and justified that a user’s ludic activities have transformative potential. This postmodern perspective also overlooks the bodily realities required to “move” through the poem; case in point the human touch of the mouse or direct physical contact with a smart screen which is required to catalyse the human engagement required to “find” the poem. The user must touch the digital poem, manoeuvring the machine to do so. The more buttons they press, the more digital poem is revealed; thus, humans’ playful activities are an essential characteristic of digital poetry. Rather than being intoxicated by the digital environment or its digital aspects, rather than becoming disconnected from their reality, the user operates the machine as an extension of their bodily and ludic cultural reality to interact with the digital poem.

Digital Poetry and Affective Connections

Naji’s (2021) discussion of “haptic gesture” in relation to digital poetry apps is useful here when considering how the interpretation of a digital poem is embodied. Digital poetry is not simply interpreted through close reading for the reasons mentioned earlier in this chapter: it incorporates multiple dynamic digital systems affecting dissemination, access and engagement. Making meaning in and from within these systems demands that users “walk through” (Light et al. 2018) the digital environment in which the digital poetry operates, considering its operating models and governance; this includes haptic interaction. In this sense, the processes of close reading and semiotics may not adequately account for the nuances and flows found in digital spaces which reduce the distance between objects and their representations and reinforce the autonomy of the human user to recognise a considerable amount of interpretative potential. This is important for the intuitive nature of technologies and thus digital poetry. Frosh (2019: 156) notes that this haptic engagement represents the bodily and emotional potential of “being moved” and, Hjorth (2011: 444) draws attention to this intimate touch as exactly why it is meaningful.

The digital poem in this sense draws conscious and unconscious attention to the intimate connection with machines rather than distract, disguise or shield users from it, blurring physical and digital boundaries. Indeed, humans have developed an intimate relationship with networked machines (Braidotti 2019), one which is often not articulated nor fully understood by individuals. We are all increasingly and continually connected to technology and hence defined by our digital influences. If we never turn off the smart devices that sit next to our beds even when we sleep, we are in fact connected and part of that computational network of digital data flows (Wolfe 2009).

Digital poetry represents the potential for writers and users to not only become aware of this personal connection but to manipulate it as a way of making sense of their relationship with machines as another experience of personhood. This thesis seeks to draw more focussed attention on the dynamic structures of digital poetry which are engineered by digital writers and require users to play with the digital poetry in order to access it, for it to be revealed and perform. In doing so, it will acknowledge the physical, affective connection to machines for both writers and users. This research asks:

- How do the playful features of digital poetry affect and augment the writer's creative process and perception of self?
- How do writers play with the creative process to purposefully and meaningfully engineer and architect playful digital poetry?
- How might this writing practice catalyse transformative potentialities for the writer and the reader?

Digital Poetry: Where are we now?

What is consistent across my appraisal of digital poetry aligns with Glazier's (2002) original argument: although these works may be thought of as "new" they are conceived through the same poetic and theoretical practices used by creatives working with paper and pen. The "new media" composition and presentation of the poetry, using the latest available technologies suggests innovation and perhaps prior to the internet revolution in the early days of hypertext

those creatives could rightfully claim originality (Funkhouser 2013). Today however, beyond surface aesthetics as discussed in relation to kinetic poetry for example, nothing new has emerged: contemporary digital poetry refines earlier types of production and disseminates works to a wider audience via networks (Funkhouser 2013). Despite the advancements in hardwares, softwares and networks, there are perceivable, recognisable and persistent boundaries notably shaped by the practices of their creation, although not as obvious nor as refined as those of “traditional” poetry. Using machines poets can weave materials and iterations, bridge layers of text, image and other technological stimuli which reach beyond the machine and affect users’ imaginations, intellect and “reality”. As code, language is most often used to provide order and “sense” within poetry; even when trying to create disorder, the process calls upon prescribed stylistic elements. The poet enacts this language through its processes. This research utilises these established models and works alongside them to focus more precisely on establishing innovations in practice which have the potential to remediate what may be considered innovations in output.

This Literature Review has demonstrated the obvious challenge, and perhaps naivety of offering a definitive definition of digital poetry. Digital poetry is complex and its identification and definition a futile exercise given the incessantly shifting digital landscape. Indeed, in the years taken to write this thesis, the field of digital literatures and therefore identifiers of digital poetry have changed innumerable times. For example, when the project first began, discussions of machine learning poetry were limited. More recently however these discussions have acknowledged the role of the machine in the practice without precise interrogation or suggestion for how digital writers can work purposefully with this non-human “collaborator”. For example, the third chapter of Naji’s (2021) *Digital Poetry* focusses on the “literary algorithm” and its “cannibalistic” effects: the processes of sharing digital poetry on the internet for liking and re-posting draws attention to the potential of the machine, as a non-human agent to re-mix the original creative piece. By feeding the neural network in this way, algorithms cannibalise this input as data with the potential to re-post and share future iterations. This research seeks to interrogate this “creative” potential to shift our perceptions of digital writing practice and its capabilities.

It is perhaps necessary here to acknowledge Purdy's (1984) discussion of technopoetics, although now over 40 years old, it is important for thinking beyond surface structures to focus on how machines inform our inventions and designs such as writing and reading poetry (Purdy 1984: 130). In the discussion, Purdy (1984) draws attention to the invisibility of machines and I perceive a direct connection here with the definitions of "postdigitality" established in the previous chapter: firstly, the omnipresence of machines in our socio-cultural experiences; and secondly, occlusion of machines in creative practice in order to restrict their appearance and maintain human autonomy which determines their omission in analysis of the representation. Purdy (1984: 131-132) suggests that the literature to come will expose these workings and that its associated analysis will therefore not be so "lame" as to wilfully ignore the importance of machines; for Purdy at this time, writers need not be so afraid of machines. A prescient connection to priorities of this research. His argument later about the disappearing "we" (1984: 134) and the somatic body-as-machine (1984: 137-138) chimes closely with the work of Braidotti (2013, 2017, 2019) on the "posthuman"; this is to be discussed later in this chapter. Purdy's (1984) argument that machines have the potential to profoundly effect literature is useful for this research, whereby poetry in its form and structure has the potential to evoke the aesthetics of machines and machines can reveal poetic characteristics with the potential to co-create. This ameliorates my understanding of "digital poetry", and even more broadly literature "born digital" (ELO n.d. online): creative intentions and processes that specifically and precisely engage, interrogate and experiment with digital means of poetic expression and which are impossible to conceive without computational practices. This forces a re-think of "writing" and "reading" as their meaning and application fail to articulate the pluralistic experiences of writers and readers with technologies, which are embodied, multisensory and reliant on contextual factors. This research argues that in contemporary culture this is the "norm" rather than the exception perhaps traditional Literary fields would have us believe and, thus we must endeavour to better understand what this entails for writing, reading and thinking about (digital) poetry.

However, that is not to say that language is simply code and software the only tool, nor poetic bots "creatives". Simanowski (2011) offers a useful reminder that a preoccupation with computational logic threatens to substantiate claims that everything in digital media is literature simply because it is represented in code. Instead, the existence of algorithms most

obviously demonstrates the blurred lines between human and machines and the effect of non-human forces on creativity. This is most purposefully assessed through a posthuman lens which acknowledges the fears and anxieties of the contemporary context (Braidotti 2019). Ultimately the prevalence of the machine demands that the practices associated with creating, reading and thinking must change (Wolfe 2009). Technology has transformed humanity and whilst this research acknowledges how digital poetry might *represent* the shifting dynamics of “human” identities and relationships, its priority is to interrogate how this informs and modifies *practices* of expression and creativity.

With this in mind, mixed reality poetry is worthy of note particularly the work of Mez Breeze which demonstrates a move towards immersive technologies as not simply another form of multimodality within this field. Mixed reality is defined within the context of the reality-virtuality continuum and also includes augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) (Milgrim et al. 1995). This continues to be a rapidly expanding form which makes use of poetic textual features yet is arguably more effectively defined as a form of experiential game forcing a “writer” to think in 4D and thus creating the potential to modify the status of language itself. Indeed, in Breeze’s (2017) *All the Delicate Duplicates* she uses *Mezangelle*, a remix of the English Language and code to create a new language (2018: 10). In this sense the legibility of text and “making sense” is not a priority; its poetic, abstract, atmospheric and experiential features create even more interpretive opportunities beyond “reading”. Strehovec (2017) recognises this as a form of resistance to the language of mainstream capitalism. The engineering and cultivation of beyond “reading” experiences within digital poetry as purposeful strategies of resistance are interesting for this research. Experiments with and reflections on my own writing practice will assess the intersection of “writing” with the hybridisation of art, technologies and literariness and its potential to create transformative experiential affective assemblage.

Digital Poetry: Posthuman Potentialities

In summary and for clarity, digital poetry is a playful form of dynamic poetry that utilises multimedia functionalities to create contexts for both composition and reception (Rettberg

2019), whilst extending our understanding of “poetry” to also include film, visual, and game cultures. This thesis asserts that the creation of digital poetry is “not restricted by subjectivity and language but is instead stimulated by the potentialities and creativities of an intensive politics of becoming” (Ruffolo 2016: 20). This extends the work of Hayles (2006: 181) to conclude that a digital poem is more usefully identified as playful, and by this, I mean recursive, chaotic, multiple, and at times contradictory processes with transformative potential. This research hypothesises that this form of creativity can be perceived as post-queer, posthuman transformations with the potential to catalyse *jouissance* (Barthes 1975: 14): the unimaginable bodily experiences of an unrecognisable fictive “identity” that defies single definition and cannot be enclosed by a signified value.

When engaged in the multiple play processes of digital poetry, writers and users produce multidimensional, complex pathways of knowledge whilst (re)inventing others. These transformations take place within a context Braidotti (2013, 2017) defines as the posthuman condition. Specifically, the playful processes of becoming digital poetry manifest within the ludic technological culture mentioned earlier in this chapter, yet Braidotti (2013, 2017) also recognises that this culture is often referred to as the Anthropocene or advanced stages of capitalism which mobilises cultural and psychological anxieties. The contemporary zeitgeist acknowledges the hypocrisies and inequalities associated with Enlightenment, humanist ideals of “man” and species hierarchy; further, the posthuman condition acknowledges that humans and non-humans operate collectively as the “subjects we are becoming” (Braidotti 2019: 2). To be posthuman is to exist in a society whose “humanity” moves beyond that positioned and defined by a man-made language and patriarchal humanist ideals; arguably this was the most pertinent take-away from Haraway’s (1991) seminal *The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. Contemporary cultural context has meant that humanist ideals have imploded: rampant neo-liberal market capitalism and globalisation; technologies continue to invade and rupture socio-cultural spaces whilst still perpetuating inequalities; the threat of climate crisis and world war threaten everyone’s place in the world. This context demands a drastic change to the familiar, established mindset and values often utilised to articulate and explain “humanity” (Braidotti 2017). Braidotti (2019) acknowledges that to act in these times is to adopt simultaneously critical and creative processes of being. This thesis positions the processes of becoming digital

poetry as demonstrating critical creative hybridity. This thesis engages with these posthuman frameworks of knowledge; hence it adopts a practice-led critical creative hybrid format.

This thesis argues that:

- digital poetry exists within the context of the posthuman condition;
- digital poetry manifests as playful processes of becoming which are a form of posthuman knowledge simultaneously critical and creative;
- writers and users engaged in these processes are themselves posthumans playing, knowingly or otherwise, with their own identities as knowledge collaborators part of a computational network; and,
- these playful processes demand posthuman frameworks of knowledge, those which are still emerging, interdisciplinary, simultaneously critical and creative and, respond to the affective context (fear, anxiety, persistence, mutability) of the posthuman condition.

The Processes of Becoming Digital Poetry: Practice-Led Transformations

The processes of becoming digital poetry are embedded in posthuman cultures and embodied by posthumans with the power to affect and be affected. Braidotti (2019) acknowledges that the creative becomings of the posthuman condition are also tiresome and frustrating. This thesis asserts that these arguments also apply to the playful processes of becoming digital poetry, and by interrogating the practices and processes informing those becomings, it will create innovative conceptual and methodological transformations which can be purposefully and effectively operationalised by digital writers and users. The development of this framework will remain connected to, whilst not simply reproducing the hegemonic biases of the traditions of the Literary Humanities, that being: self-reflective creative writing practice, feminism and gender studies, postcolonial and critical race theories, for example. The practice-led endeavours of this research acknowledges that these critical approaches are not able to adequately articulate the complexities and complications of the processes of becoming digital poetry which are inherently posthuman and therefore multiscalar, transversal and

trans-corporeal. To be clear, my own writing practices and processes will not be utilised to articulate another “white [heterosexual, patriarchal, able-bodied] panic” (Morton 2013).

This research acknowledges queer discourses such as those of Butler (1989; 1990; 1991; 1993) and Sedgwick (1990; 2003) who focus attention on representations, significations and identifications which has limited use for the productive interrogation of the complexities and multiplicities of the processes of becoming digital poetry. Butler’s notion of performativity highlights how bodies are produced as subjects, inscribed by discursive practices; this research determines that this model is limiting because of its reliance on (“Human”) discourse. The processes of becoming digital poetry provide opportunities for writers and users to engage in multiple, complex and at times contradictory semiotic structures, including but not limited to language, audio-visual signifiers, movement and performance style combining performance with the performative (Butler 1990) to undermine and expose the patriarchal ideologies which underpins language. Slavoj Žižek’s (cited in Butler, 1993) definition of queer is arguably more when utilised to interrogate the processes of becoming digital poetry because it is paradoxically comprised of both Symbolic discourse, in this case the linguistic binaries that characterise its literariness; and, the re-signifying practices of play that resist Symbolisation.

This practice is also informed by Ruffolo’s (2016) conceptions of the “post-queer” as it shifts the focus from subjects-as-beings to dialogical-becomings, recognising the potential for unrestricted subjectivities and languages stimulated by the possibilities and creativities which manifest as part of the processes of becoming. When evaluating the processes and practices of becoming digital poetry, this thesis will adopt a post-queer perspective, being careful not to position itself in contrast or opposition to queer. Ruffolo (2016) clearly points out that post-queer disturbs queer theory, but it does not seek to erase it: “post” does not signal “after” queer. The post-queer creates new flows materialising from the queer/heteronormative dyad, remaining connected with queer, yet espousing discrete variations from queer. Yet “post-queer” still positions the concept within the hierarchical system of language; “post-queer” as a noun or adjective makes it part of the Symbolic Order which isolates its political meaning and thus limits its playful potential. In her discussion of “queerspace”, Rhodes (2004: 388) asserts that her refusal to impose “queer” as a distinct adjective (“queer-space”) acknowledges that it cannot be limited to nor defined by the boundaries of Symbolic Order,

and thus cannot be made “real”. This implies that “queerspace”, much like play as discussed earlier, has the potential to oppose power through the implosion of hierarchical boundaries such as those imposed by language. This research argues that this thinking also applies to “post-queer” and therefore asserts that “postqueer” is a more useful concept. Postqueer is comparable to previous literary formations such as the Gothic, modernism and *écriture féminine*, yet extends these when applied specifically to the perpetually shifting digital playful postqueerspaces and processes of digital poetry. This research hypothesises that in this context, the postqueer extends partly because of the posthuman connection between creators, networked computers and users that is inextricably linked to the process of becoming digital poetry. Thus, this research refines its understanding of the processes of becoming digital poetry to not just include play but to also include numerous postqueerbodies functioning in postqueerspaces.

This research investigates the processes of becoming digital poetry within postqueerspaces and perceives these spaces as functioning similarly to and extending the potential of “viral counterpublics” (Somers-Willet 2014: 21). Somers-Willets (2014) defines counterpublics as openly countercultural discursive spaces that enable marginalised groups to articulate and interpret the identities, interests and needs of their members in opposition to the dominant “public” or hegemony. Arguably poetry in various forms, but particularly digital for the reasons mentioned earlier in this chapter, interrogates the personal as political and therefore has the potential to accumulate political allies. More specifically, this research will attempt to demonstrate this through my own multimodal processes of becoming digital poetry manifested through the creation of *Viole(n)t Existence*, which is thematically concerned with the multiplicities and contradictions of womanhood within a posthuman context. My “womanhood” is defined by my working class, disabled experiences of selfhood and thus my poetry is a creative expression of my marginalised identities with a view to creating a discursive space through the playful processes of becoming digital poetry. The processes of becoming digital poetry not only legitimise the plurality of my identity but creates spaces where others are also potentially mobilised to (re)claim their identities.

This research is of course, particularly interested in the “digital” manifestations of the poetry and thus a defining characteristic of this is the digital spaces and platforms which intersect

with the poetry itself. As explained earlier in this chapter, forms of digital poetry can also involve the integration of user generated content, which typically operates outside of the Canon and is often perceived as having little or no cultural value; at least not “literary” or “art”. My digital poetry is accessible via Twitter and YouTube. This research positions the processes of becoming digital poetry as a form of digital participatory practice, with the potential to mobilise reciprocal online “conversations” with other social media users in the form of likes, comments, shares, as a hybrid form of direct, affective communication operating within digital socio-political spaces or, “viral counterpublics” (Somers-Willett 2014: 21). As mentioned in this chapter, users engage in complex ways: the open nature demands that users must play and participate within a network of various signifying systems which come together and also separate (van Dijck 2013), thus accommodating disorientating, thematically unknown possibilities (even to the writer) and multivocal consciousness (Sloane 2000). This has the potential to affect what users perceive as possible or “real” (Frank 2010). Participating and performing with the processes of digital poetry in this way not only affects their perceptions of the texts, but also themselves.

Multimodal viewing strategies and social media participation not only effects users’ perceptions of what they see on screen, but perceptions of their own performances and participations. A poetry film, for example is an open text with polysemic potential simultaneously comprised of: hybridity itself (i.e. hybrid form such as animation and documentary-style); the unique multi-linear pathways that users must navigate in order to discover the text: and, the changeable nature of access conditions. The text diffuses amongst a myriad of haphazard, seemingly aimless and thus obfuscated digital exchanges where a single recognisable political agenda or movement is not always pronounced, evidenced, nor important in a variety of multimodal forms, touching a wide array of progressive issues. This aligns with Chepp’s (2016) research on activating politics with poetry.

Writers and users in this context are multimodal posthuman creatives continuously playing with combinations of aesthetic and communicative codes including coded online paradigms to create, share and interact with the processes of becoming digital poetry. These practices invite the participation of others, potentially unknown social media users. Virtual communications as a method of playful creativity liberates “bodies” of all description to

engage in digital discursive events, conversations and informational exchanges which not only enable critical and creative responses, but also help to maintain the networks that create this potential. The processes of becoming digital poetry do not perform an emotive or entertaining narrative to generate sentimental emotions or empathy, nor are these experiences furnished with a final signified. This would romanticise and fetishise the transformative potentialities and associated experiences through assumed social and subjective connections. The processes of becoming digital poetry engage the “bodies” of writers, users, non-human networks and networked communities in the playful performativity of emotions and feelings, without assuming to know themselves, each other or indeed the associated affects. The performance catalyses a space for these bodies to engage in continuous politically-charged affective play where “social” and “cultural” orders, including “reality”, “representation” and “subjectivity” are radically challenged. This categorises the processes of becoming digital poetry as assemblage, as it makes “connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders” (Deleuze and Guattari 2007: 22) and thus catalyses the dynamic creation of unpredictable, polymorphous potentialities.

This research is keen to understand how the playful processes of becoming digital poetry “perform” creativity in this context where viral counterpublics have the potential to facilitate affective postqueerspaces: an assemblage of postqueerbodies which are (un-)knowable and, difficult to construct, resisting appropriation by Literature even language. Ruffolo asserts that “post-queer politics intends to interrupt not only queer theory but theory in general where there is a critical need to move beyond language as a means for conceptualising all experience” (2016: 22). The theory in question here is those which inform writing practices. This poses a great challenge for writers familiar with the traditional, modes, methods and practices of creative writing. This research seeks to understand how the processes of becoming digital poetry utilise familiar tools and practice, whilst also experimenting with new digital codes and conventions, including the non-linear and interactive tools offered by web 2.0 functionality which is inherently connected to the potentialities of postqueerspaces. This form of multimodal creative practice is simultaneously comprised of: the performative signs and political potential made evident in the digital poetry and its components; the on-going manipulation of technological interactivities inherent to computational networks and user generated content; and, negotiated responses to the unknown participating networked

“audience”. As mentioned earlier, I shall say more about this in the following chapter by way of countering the argument that these types of playful participation are simply depoliticised acts of technological fetishism and instruments for communicative capitalism.

The Processes of Becoming Digital Poetry: Experimenting with *Jouissance*

This research investigates the transformative potentialities that are catalysed by the processes of becoming digital poetry, practice-led interventions and experiments which move with and beyond representations, significations, subjectivities and discourses. It hypothesises that these processes architect, function within and continue to extend postqueerspaces as polysemic, fictive “bodies” that reveal themselves as postqueer dialogical-becoming(s) (Ruffolo 2016) which do not require prior materialisations (as is required with performance).

This research seeks to utilise the work of Braidotti (2019) to extend the work of Sontag (1964) and Simanowski (2011) on the “erotic hermeneutics of art”. Multiple deeply affective assemblages are catalysed through the processes of becoming digital poetry; these are not always intellectual but are directly affecting whether this is knowable or not. The imaginaries within these critical creative rhizomatic structures intensively affect posthumans beyond hermeneutic interpretation. This might be described as “erotic”, “sensory”, “passionate”, “intense” but it may not. They are postdisciplinary transformations rather than distinctions aligned with the minoritarian of knowing and knowledge practices; they are dynamic and nomadic and thus actualise unprecedented modes of epistemic relations (Stimpson 2016; Lykke 2011). This research argues that the processes of becoming digital poetry are not concerned with (re)producing meaning but with producing creative desires for their own playful sake, thus they are de-territorialised, not requiring, reinforcing, reorganising nor working within hierarchical structures. They are in perpetual states of metamorphosis and thus have the potential to catalyse the unrecognisable, radical experiences of *jouissance*.

This thesis seeks to operationalise a useful demonstration of Barthes’ (1975) *jouissance* by defining it within the context of Braidotti’s work on posthuman knowledge (2019). Perceptively there is a striking connection: in a posthuman context, *jouissance* can be thought

of as a collective resource which acknowledges the over-exposure of the “human” and is more than we can see. It offers a knowledge *practice* with the potential to actualise the radical unknown, unimaginable, phantasmagoric manifestations of endlessly polysemic selves. This thesis will utilise various multimodal forms of critical and creative practice as the processes of becoming digital poetry to investigate its potential to catalyse *jouissance*. Unlike other forms of research, this thesis will not be able to “prove” the existence of *jouissance* as an outcome of these experiments, but it hopes to demonstrate embedded, embodied, relational, contradictory, ongoing processes of becoming with the potential.

The processes of becoming digital poetry demand attention be paid to the incongruous dynamism of multiple semiotic structures and the (unknowable) posthuman connections between writers, machines and users, which cannot be simply defined as “writing practice” or audience “engagement” or “interpretation”. Therefore, the critical creative hybrid toolkit this thesis develops and applies for creative writing practice will also be the one applied for critical analysis. The thesis will evidence and critically analyse my experiments with the playful processes of becoming digital poetry. These experiments and forms of analysis will hybridise critical and creative processes and approaches as a form of posthuman knowledge production in and of itself. As explained in this chapter, these methods work alongside existing frameworks of knowledge and are necessary to determine the transformative potentialities that may be catalysed. This is especially crucial as this thesis hypothesises that play in this context has the potential to reverse power (including that of Literature, Academia even language itself) as hierarchical boundaries implode and traditional dichotomies blur, when writers, users and machines are connected through these posthuman postqueer processes of becoming. With that being said, the methods and practices that emerge will not be considered “another” literary theory in opposition or beyond others, but a posthuman tool to support change in the field of the Literary Humanities, as a “way of doing” critical posthumanism.

Experiments in Multimodal Creative Writing: **Establishing the Tools and Methods of Postdigital** **Ludic Practice.**

The previous chapter, the Literature Review articulated a complex and nuanced account of the process of becoming digital poetry as integral to the central concerns of this research. The chapter concluded that these processes of becoming, whilst engaged and connected to writing practices and interactivity, could not be defined by these terms as this would overlook and undermine the ludic mechanics, activities and behaviours that are fundamental to those processes of becoming. The Literature Review established that an operational critical creative hybrid toolkit which acknowledged the continuous, recursive and at times contradictory multimodal practices associated with the processes of becoming digital poetry for both writers and users would be useful: a way to articulate experiences which are not only playful but at times difficult to discern, yet represent posthuman knowledge (Braidotti 2019) with the potential to catalyse further transformative processes. In addition, an inherently playful approach to understanding and interpreting these practices which does not seek “answers” or “truth” but operates within the assemblage as another body of knowledge. Thus, this hybrid toolkit is a form of critical posthumanism working alongside existing frameworks of knowledge whilst still becoming.

This chapter identifies and reflects upon my playful writing experiments which inform the hybrid toolkit, postdigital ludic practice. It will use my own hypermedia poetry, *Viole(n)t Existence* as evidence of the tools and methods utilised to create the playful processes of becoming digital poetry. Although I identify a register for this toolkit, it is important to acknowledge that this is not a definitive list of tools and methods as this would undermine its potential. This toolkit continues to emerge.

Context and Rationale

My interest in play as a literary and aesthetic tool began in the early 2000s after feeling drawn as a writer and literature academic to the Modernist shift in focus from content to form as experiments with generic and conventional expectations that drew attention to the fragility of traditional artistic structures and institutionalised forms of representation. This led to a discovery of the avant-garde, including Dadaism and Surrealism which proactively used art as a political tool to interrogate bourgeois society and then subsequently examples of the postmodern. It was interesting to examine how writers used the game, or rules of literature (language, grammar, syntax, metaphor, form, genre for example) to play: to challenge and subvert readerly expectations. This occurred whilst also studying media and culture with a particular interest in digital futures and the implications for both humans and machines. Both literature and media as academic disciplines led to a special interest in how literature and technology intersect through a lens of poststructuralist theories and concepts, namely Barthes' ideal text (1970, cited in Landow 2006: 53), Levi-Strauss' (1966) bricolage and Derrida's (1979 cited in Landow 2006: 54) deconstruction and intertextuality. These academic interests led to the discovery of digital literatures. A history of this form, paying close attention to the definitions and multimodal manifestations of literary-ludic texts (Ensslin 2014) and specifically the process of becoming digital poetry is discussed in the previous chapter.

There are now multiple well-established academic, critical frameworks for decoding and interpreting these forms of digital literatures; frameworks which combine traditional literary close reading (that is assessing the use and integration of the "rules" of literature) with ludological techniques (that is the playful, or ludic elements) such as evaluating ergodicity (or non-trivial interactions with the text (Aarseth 1997)), navigational iconicity, narrative analysis of the construction of multi-linear pathways and networks within the text, and, assessment of user hacking and modification of the text; as well as, representational features such as the symbolism of audio-visual components and user interface design.

As a media and culture academic the terms "ludic", "gamification", "ludic turn" kept appearing as part of my pursuit to define and interrogate the contemporary digital age, its manifestations and implications. These terms were defined in the previous chapter of this thesis. As a literature scholar and poet, it seems important to explore and interrogate what "literary-ludic" hybridity might actually mean and look like for writers existing in a ludic age. It is worth

recognising that a digital multimodal writer does not simply write a poem or piece of fiction, but must also architect a dynamic space, demanding interactivity, to “publish” the piece. However, it was noted quite soon into my playful experiments in creativity, that the implications and realities of this challenge were not as openly discussed nor examined in the academic literature relating to literary-ludic hybridity as were the tools and methods for critical analysis; even though there was acknowledgment that literary-ludic writers also often became software innovators (Ensslin 2014).

Barnard (2017) notes that both hardware and software dates quickly and that digital multimodal writers are invested in becoming adept with new innovations, yet they do not explore the precise implications this may have for writing practice. If writers acquire new skills in digital and media literacy as part of writing practice only for it to change before a piece is finished, the implication might be that the work is a “draft” as opposed to “finished”; a previous iteration of what eventually becomes an elusive “final” piece. The discourse relating to digital multimodality and literary-ludic literatures seems to ignore the possibility that writers were not simply drafting one complete or “finished” piece, but pieces in constant metamorphosis that come together as whole archives of creative material. This would suggest that the compilation and curation of this archive and ludic interaction is also part of the practice. This poses questions about identifying the “end” of the creative practice for digital multimodal writers.

The work of Skains (2019) has been useful for scholars and writers in this sense, acknowledging the layering of metaphors and the dynamic nature of narrative that is bound within the materiality of a literary-ludic text. The work of Hayles (2002) also serves as a useful reminder that the literary-ludic writer produces a material artefact which emerges across multiple layers of digital materiality whilst also evidencing how multimodal resources have been assembled and deployed. Indeed, this was integral for understanding how digital poetry operates as processes of becoming as discussed in the previous chapter. For me, these insights have been particularly percipient given the attention paid to understanding the intuitive and sometimes spontaneous nature of literary-ludic writing practices and behaviours; particularly the acknowledgement that these types of writers often engage with and utilise their chosen medium as a result of their own experiences, rather than skills

acquired through formal training. That being said, a writer's developing understanding of these media may be integral to the practice of writing itself: the writing practices inform their understanding of the chosen media and also the implications of chosen media on the writing practices and the potential "finished" texts. These implications not being foreseen before writing in this way, with this media.

This increases awareness of how variations in hardware and software affords the literary-ludic writer the opportunity to develop their craft, whilst simultaneously developing a more nuanced insight into media capabilities and literary-ludic practices with each new multimodal iteration (Skains 2019). This type of media awareness and analysis is useful for identifying not only the material aspects of the digital text(s) but also signals a move towards a more punctilious engagement with how the changing and disparate nature of these affect the writing practices of the literary-ludic writer.

Traditional publishing affords some sense of gratification as a writer: someone else thinks the work is "good", the publisher promotes the work, ensures it is stocked in bookshops and, essentially that it finds a readership; thus, there are tangible, measurable markers of success (reviews and sales figures, for example). Yet, there seemed to be little in the discourse relating to measuring the success of literary-ludic texts and associated writing practices. Barnard recognises that this linear model is not as straightforward in this digital context, "re-positioning writer, publisher, bookseller and reader" (2017: 276), whilst also noting Wilkins' (2014, cited in Barnard 2017) comments on the investment digital writers put into managing their own social media profiles and websites. This of course can help promote the writer and their work, whilst also taking time and energy away from the work. Writers of digital texts essentially seemed to take on the responsibility of publishing their work themselves (i.e. that process of architecting the publication space that has dictated the need to produce their own software programmes) and therefore finding their own readership. Hall (2013) notes how the production of many various creative outputs might affect a writer's workflow, with additional and new editing and drafting stages. However, Hall's (2013) account does not explicitly mention what these new stages might look like now digitised and dispersed across the many various computational networks.

Despite there now being a recognisable literary-ludic canon with award-winning examples and creators, in the main digital writers still did not seem able to measure the “success” of their work, especially considering this is work that centres on potentially endless interactivity, polysemy and collaborative play. It became interesting to see how a writer might account for this part of the practice, that is to say the drafting and, recording and measurement of success in relation to the editing and production of the dynamic, playful components of the text. Correspondingly, it seemed unsatisfactory as a writer to not have insight into the readers’, or in this context users’, experience of the writing created; to not have “sight” of the interactions, connections and potential collaborations being experienced online and how they might modify the writing and the writing practice. Real-life accounts of the interactivity, participation or collaboration with users seemed missing from the academic literature, again focussing on the final piece rather than how it came to be.

It also seemed that there might be evidence of hybridity here: user generator content for social media platforms as part of the digital multimodal creative output. Again, this did not seem a factor extensively explored in the literary-ludic discourse. Barnard’s (2015) account of Twitter as an archival tool is useful in part: Twitter posts recording thoughts, ideas and stimuli that may end up in creative pieces. Yet the article does not explicitly mention how this content might become part of the creative work as a direct result of the media literacy of both writer and users, for example as part of that archive of digital creative output mentioned earlier; nor does it consider the potential hybridity between user-generated social media content and the creative writing. For example, comments on posts might have included links to further research or inspirational sources, but they may also have been recorded as “found” elements in the final work that capture the social interactions between writers and users. They might also be considered a form of creative non-fiction where memoir or autobiographical elements blur fiction and imagination. For example, posting to a personal social media account might be perceived as an act of playful identity construction (Raessens 2006). In this sense a social media profile might be considered a personal archive as well as a writing archive (Barnard 2015) and that this “autobiography” might enter into the multimodal ludic text; a further example of hybridity in the literary-ludic text being created. If the content is published to a professional profile, this evidences how the multimodal ludic text intersects with a personal profile as a different “chapter” of the “autobiography”. This in turn evidences another level of

hybridity concerning personae, identity construction and authenticity of personhood in the creative output and, potential conflicts. That is to say that the experiences or themes covered in the user generated content across platforms compared to those explored in creative writing may contradict or challenge each other.

Barnard (2017) notes that the future of writing must account for technological shifts in process and practice, of which there is little discussion. As a writer and academic, getting closer to understanding the possibilities and challenges afforded to digital multimodal practice dictated the need to record and reflect on the various stages of the creative process itself, to “test the possibilities” (Millard and Munt 2014: 101, cited in Barnard 2017: 277) of the tools and methods of a multimodal ludic writer (Barnard 2017) rather than just engaging in literary-ludic analysis of the final creative output. This practice-led method is comprised of specific types of observation and analysis, informed by the work of Skains (2017) those being: self-directed ethnomethodology during composition involving continual note-taking, journaling and reflective commentary that try to make sense of the practice as it happens; and, media-specific analysis of these observations, which may include semiotics and critical theories of narratology.

Following on from the work of Skains (2019) in particular, this research will add to the limited corpus of critical discussions which recognise and articulate the experiences of literary-ludic writers by identifying an original, useable and agile register which accounts for these particular writing tools, methods and encounters, and is informed by my own practice-led research. Practice-led research perceives the creative practice and the output of this practice as the sites of critical investigation, with the intention of developing artistic practices, both for the individual and the field (in this case digital literatures), whilst also contemplating new theoretical contributions to knowledge (Skains 2016); it is both process and product (Sullivan 2010). My practice operates in dialogue with my theoretical investigations and critical analysis, developing new insights (Crewe 2021).

My initial experimentations with this digital form (even though rudimentary because of a fairly basic practical digital skillset and availability of hardware and software) provided a lot of scope for evidencing those previously mentioned poststructuralist perspectives, whilst also

suggesting how the ludic mechanisms of the text might evidence purposeful, formative play. Yet the focus of these experiments had been textual analysis (narrative, ludological, semiotic, for example) and had not addressed the various, intricate playful stages of the creative practice itself. This analysis did not account for the playful engagement with writing tools or methods, nor reflect the experimentation with other forms of artistic and digital activity. It also did not account for the interactions with users or other creatives as an integral part of the process.

Once various stages and experiences of the writing practice had been recorded, reflections produced a functional register for the characteristics and features of ludic practice, much in the same way that there is a recognisable and functional register associated with “traditional” pen and paper, linear methods; for example, “draft”, “edit”, “cut”, “workshop”, “feedback loop”. Although it is perceivable that a writer’s intentions limit the objective outcomes of this practice-led method, it is important for the critical interrogation of the writer’s own experiences and processes. In the context of digital writing this is all the more valuable and advantageous as a literary-ludic writer can “lose” their work to the network in unpredictable and at times phantasmagorical ways. The process of accounting for these iterations and encounters harnesses the potential to make these experiences intelligible and articulatable, thus contributing new insights in this type of writing practice.

This is not to say that this “new” register would abandon already established discourse. As previously outlined, literary-ludic writing is composed of both “traditional” literary elements and digital, playful ones; the blurred boundaries of analogue-digital hybridity would need to be reflected in any functional register. Essentially it would need to recognise and account for ludic writing practice as a postdigital activity. Alexenberg (2011: 10) explains that the postdigital reflects a fundamental need for artists and creative practitioners to assert their humanity in their use of digital technologies. This is achieved through the interplay between cyberspace and physical space and, the digital, biological, cultural and spiritual. This may occur in social, creative, physical and media-augmented spaces, bringing together various aspects of our everyday life; blurring the boundaries between technology and practice and, haptic, sensory and kinaesthetic experiences. There is also a keen focus on peer production: postdigital creatives produce “alternative media” through participation and interaction,

operating in a “network world” which actively invites collaboration. This results in dynamic, hybrid artforms, where process and practice are formative experiences (Alexenberg 2011: 33). This paradigm synchronises precisely with the earlier definition of how ludic characteristics and behaviours manifest within our contemporary ludic culture. Therefore, the practice is determined as *postdigital ludic practice*.

Defining Postdigital Ludic Practice: experiments in writing

I set out to create a literary-ludic text soon realising that this was a bigger challenge than initially perceived. Over the period of a year, the process of recording and collating all of my ludic experiments began on the understanding that it might help to move the writing project, entitled *Violen(t) Existence*, forward. *Violen(t) Existence* is gender-informed work (Mencia 2021) discernible in the fact that the author identifies as female and *Violen(t) Existence* interrogates the pluralistic and often contradictory nature of female experiences in a commitment to the author’s own personal feminism. Of equal importance is the commitment this text makes to acknowledging the work of notable female scholars in the field of digital literatures such as Hayles, Bell, Ensslin, Mencia and Skains for example, as the outcome of a transdisciplinary, decentralised practice-led approach which interlaces (social, cultural and personal) histories, technologies, practices with the creative and critical. The outcomes then are more than the sum total parts of *Violen(t) Existence* as a digital text. These “experiments” contribute to the vital work female academics do to decolonise the field of digital literatures which continues to be predominantly male (Mencia 2021: 143-146).

Hitherto this discussion has drawn attention to the function of play in digital literatures, integral to its form and structure whilst also acknowledging its connection to modes of access and interaction. This chapter focusses on my writing experiments and making sense of the many multimodal processes that comprise this practice. It is therefore important to stress that digital literatures are not just playful but are made through playful formative activities and practices with transformative potential. My writing experiments as presented here as a form of self-directed ethnomethodology were playful. This research argues that play is not simply

integral to the digital text but is a defining characteristic of the culture which produces the posthuman postdigital writer and thus essential to the writer and their practice.

In assessing and reflecting on the tools and methods of postdigital ludic practice, it struck me that in some cases they demonstrated Caillois' (2001, first published in 1961) four play types: *alea* (chance), *ilinx* (causing dizziness or 'vertigo' perceived in this instance as the potential excitement but also 'anxiety' produced by the complexity and unpredictability of networks), *mimicry* (make-believe or role-play) and *agon* (competition). This afforded this research an opportunity to evidence how to purposefully and productively engage with and apply Caillois' work rather than considering it difficult and problematic (Sutton-Smith 1997). This had not been predicted in the early stages of this project. It does however demonstrate how postdigital ludic practice seeks to work alongside and extend existing frameworks of knowledge; and in doing so, extends the critical discussions of Caillois' work arguably with more productive outcomes.

The following list of tools and methods were also recorded to varying degrees and concluded to be integral to the dynamism and experimental nature of postdigital ludic writing practice, whilst also evidencing Caillois' play types and their potential. Each of the following actions were considered to evidence at least one of these play types to some extent, ensuring that the practice was indeed "ludic" and synonymous with the creative process for literary-ludic texts. They are written in the continuous present because these activities are ongoing and do not operate in discreet stages as in "standard" writing practice. They operate in elastic overlapping circles, accounting also for the liminal spaces play formations and activities create when occupying the "in between" of play forms, structures and behaviours (Sutton-Smith 1997) whilst blurring boundaries. Indeed, my own literary-ludic project, *Viole(n)t Existence* is not "finished", therefore neither is the writing.

The practice-led observations and analysis revealed that the following activities at times took place individually, sometimes together, but did reoccur at various stages of the writing process throughout a four-year period. The record of tools and methods was critically reflected upon before forming this case study and emerging register. The immediate observation was that unlike writers' tools of the past which have been "simple and discreet" (Barnard 2017: 279),

this postdigital ludic practice was increasingly complex, discursive, recursive and capricious. “Emerging” is used here to account for the further experiments and assessments necessary to capture the perpetually changing landscape of activities associated with this practice. Needless-to-say there can be no doubt that a definitive, exhaustive, hierarchical list is not possible, as this could not account for the myriad freedoms and challenges posed by the composition of literary-ludic form.

Postdigital Ludic Practice: an emerging register of tools and methods

My reflections identified a pattern of recurring behaviours which appeared to manifest in various ways as integral to the practice. These three ubiquitous activities (re)occurred repeatedly, even when initially difficult to discern, at various stages of the writing process. These activities served to interact with and bolster other creative approaches. Identifying and categorising these activities and devices would provide a useful source for literary-ludic writers. Especially as these methods are unique to postdigital ludic practice and the production of literary-ludic texts specifically. Therefore, the naming and categorising of these activities and devices is a useful source for literary-ludic writers. The examples offered come from my own experiences of self-directed ethnomethodology which were recorded in various multimodal journals and files.

Vigorous movement: the writer is required to navigate and negotiate virtual and physical networks; spaces which demand shifting perspectives of time and space. These networks change scale and shape incessantly, therefore there is no choice but to disperse amongst these dynamics also changing shape, direction and perspective endlessly. Being alert to the chaos of networks required flexing, bending, twisting, turning, swaying, toing and froing, coming and going: in order to perceive any sense at all, tools, methods and arguably the writer themselves might be perceived as chaotic. There is no right or wrong way to move and inevitably there is always another move to make. This ensures that the writing practice is a frenetic experience. This movement is both embodied and cognitive.

This method is evident in *Violen)t Existence* as movement on the page: some of the writing “moves” between creative non-fiction prose and lyrical poetry. It is also physical movement as I was filmed performing some poetry at times and in locations where a formal poetry reading had not been promoted nor scheduled; this surprised the “audience”, particularly as I continued to move around the spaces whilst “performing”. These videos can also be accessed via my YouTube channel and feature alongside other short films of the same poems, this time performed at scheduled spoken word events. This is vigorous movement through virtual and physical networks; the writer and the “work” moves in different spaces, at different times, in different forms.

The multimodal content which forms *Violen)t Existence* includes digital manifestations of the poetry published in the collection, *Violet Existence* (Broken Sleep Books, May 2022). These “texts” coexist: the writing moves between the printed and digital page; this is made clear and highlighted to the digital reader via links to the publisher’s website. Where the writing in *Violet Existence* can no longer change shape, the digital presentation, *Violen)t Existence* continues to move within a digital archive connected to various evolving digital networks, including social media profiles and online reviews of the analogue version.

To promote the published pamphlet, I cut up the poems into fragments and posted these fragments to my Twitter (now X) profile without links or access to the full poem, but instead a link to the publisher’s website where the pamphlet could be purchased. This was to purposefully pique the interest of the users of the network and encourage book sales. In doing so, it also raised my profile as a poet and led to enquiries about performing my poetry live which I received through the private messaging function on the platform. Most users did not add comments to these threads, but the posts were shared. Presented as a piece of short form communication rather than the full poem, disseminated amongst a similar social network, these posts share similarities with Instapoetry made famous by female poets such as Rupi Kaur. Instapoetry has often been dismissed and denigrated in literary circles (Naji 2021). Like the work of Kaur, my poetry fragments “move” amongst, but are not limited to the following socio-cultural networks, so too me as the “writer” and social media “user”:

- commercially driven social media platforms;
- user generated content with commercial motivations;

- a rejection of craft and a dumbing down of poetry;
- honest and accessible poetry; and,
- self-indulgent identity work.

Moving in this way simultaneously connects these poetic fragments to: traditions, not limited to the literary, which have defined women and their creative practice and expression as too emotional, or hysterical even; and, the potential to utilise digital practices and networks as an open disparagement of Literature, “poetry” and the meaning or purpose of social media posting. This movement rejects simplistic binaries as the digital space affords the opportunity for constant change and thus, the fragments are perceived in different ways at different times, even by myself as the poet and user. The response to the posts helped shape my perception of other fragments I would consider posting and, the time and day of posting. I concluded that these fragments did not transpire into book sales, instead they acted as a living extension of the poems in their printed form. This usurps traditional publishing models as the poetry moves amongst reading communities who would not typically seek poetry, nor Literature. In its social media form, the fragments are accessible to global communities with the potential to share, remix and disseminate various iterations of the original post. The fragments move in ways and directions unknowable or unpredictable to myself as the writer; when it is reposted to someone else’s profile with their image attached, it becomes their poem too, moving amongst even more semantic and socio-cultural dimensions.

Considering my female identities are integral to my poetry, both thematically and the writing practice itself, and my social media profiles operate as a form of digital autobiographical archive as mentioned earlier in this chapter, these fragments not only represent my posthuman existence but embody it. Both the poetry fragments and I move together and separately amongst physical and digital connections with other networked users, made possible by machines and algorithms. The technosocial materialities of the fragments remind us of the prevalence and importance of technology in our human lives whilst playing with technosocial (non-human) agents in this way demonstrates the affective potential of this assemblage. In this sense the changing shape of humans within the context of the posthuman condition, changes the shape and nature of signification. It is a fluid, collaborative, contextual working *with* machines to create and communicate in multi-sensory ways. Mangen (2008)

argues that reading from screens is a detached experience, yet this research argues that phenomenological and embodied connections are intensified.

Simanowski (2010) reminds us that an intense focus on the materiality of digital texts undermines its linguistic signification and thus its potential. Therefore, it is important to move between semiotic systems not just as part of the writing practice, but for the purposeful and meaningful analysis of these types of literary-ludic texts. Postdigital ludic practice as a critical toolkit for analysis will be the focus of the next chapter of this thesis. In summary, it moves amongst whilst simultaneously contradicts the processes of signification and hermeneutics, and technosocial materialities and contexts to articulate affective posthuman frameworks of knowledge.

Reciprocal performing: the writer is required to act, to perform within virtual and physical networks that they move between and amongst: they are always participating. To catalyse any kind of interaction or collaboration, the writer must be prepared to give something of themselves to the network and its participants. The writer alternates between various personae: writer, reader, aesthete, artist, crafter, user, host, audience, mentor, protégé, trendsetter, follower, scroller, content generator, sharer, commentator, architect, voyager, cognoscente, novice... These do not occur in binary opposition, adopting traits and behaviours of multiple identities simultaneously; theirs is a pluralistic postqueer posthuman performance mediated at times by the performance(s) of others. There can be no single performance: a writer must be proactive and reactive acknowledging that continued mutual exchanges are necessary for movement amongst networks. To an extent this could be considered a predictable feature of postdigital ludic practice providing some reassurance in an otherwise decentred, dislocated experience. It might also be considered a “remedy” for writer’s block: if a writer does not know what to say or do for themselves, they can seek inspiration and knowledge from “conversations” with others. Literary-ludic writers do not act alone, they are part of an ensemble cast.

As in the example detailed previously, I have performed *Violen)t Existence* in multiple ways and these “acts” continue to define and re-define the work. The audiences who expected my performance responded through their non-verbal feedback to my voice, tone, pitch and

volume. Those that were not expecting my performance including internet users informed my vocal style and delivery in new ways, those that I could not have predicted. Some of the videos of me “performing” unexpectedly, that is to say not at scheduled readings or events were filmed with me speaking directly to camera in close up, breaking the fourth wall and seemingly in close proximity to the viewer, in a confessional “talking torso” style which I then edited before posting. Rather than positioning the camera so as *not* to make eye contact such as in the recordings of my live performances at scheduled readings and events, this style of video seeks to establish an intimate connection with the user emphasising facial expression and micro movements of the eyes and mouth. Being aware of these conventions, I became very conscious of how I could use subtle changes in my expression as well as voice to communicate the emotional tensions in the poem.

Talking directly to the camera and the unknown audience made me incredibly self-aware, not only trying on different outfits and hairstyles prior to filming, but also changing the location of the filming multiple times whilst also considering the effect of lighting and ambient sound. I was also conscious to be filmed in locations without identifying features, so that I could not be directly located geographically. I was aware that these videos would be available on public platforms not just my own personal profiles and therefore I felt it important to represent myself as a professional and competent poet, whilst also not revealing too much of my private identity.

Yet, the poems in *Violen)t Existence* often utilise the first person to document, reflect and represent feelings and experiences related to very personal themes such as family. When presented as a public video this blurs the boundaries of the “private” and “public”: the diary-like style is personal but directed towards an imagined audience and so the need to represent myself, my experience and my identity is mediated by the fact that this must be accessible, communicated in a way that forges connections (van Dijck 2013). As a form of digital diary or autobiography, my multimodal performances take advantage of audio-visual components as additional artistic elements helping to make private feelings or reflections even more accessible and arresting (Coldry 2008). Digital signifiers and networked functionality create plausible, compelling polyvocal stories which legitimise these realities through the playful

blurring between the private and the public, through the exchanging and disclosing of personal information open to others in complex networks.

These factors combined emphasise that the performance is a film to be shared, and therefore I felt the need to create a multimodal performance that would be understood and well-received. Indeed, this feeling encouraged me to make more of these types of videos because when the original videos were shared the comments from known and unknown users were positive and encouraging. The sharing amongst unknown networks gave me a sense of achievement, providing some evidence that people recognised my work, which could potentially raise my profile as a poet and performer. The people were not all from a literary “scene” or background and yet their ability and willingness to engage with my material was very gratifying and rewarding for me. This was important self-validation for me. Although I found this type of multimodal performance challenging because being able to see the camera drew attention to the fact I was being filmed and then “watched” closely by others acting almost as a mirror to myself as well as others, it was an interesting experiment in the blurring of live and on-screen performance.

Performing in this way is an example of “testifying” (Chepp 2016), following a political tradition of activist storytelling in public to inform opinion by deploying one’s own subjective experiences or point of view. Chepp (2016: 45) draws attention to spoken word conventions and devices as “awareness-raising tool[s]” to activate politics, harking back to autobiographical slave narratives and, the personal stories of second wave feminists told in consciousness-raising groups. As a female poet performing in the voices of multiple and contradictory female personae, I claim these experiences as my own representing a woman who is able to challenge and resist the stereotypical narratives that seek to define and dominate womanhood. This form of “counter-storytelling” (Chepp 2016: 45) is a strategic device utilised for achieving activist goals including advocating for subaltern identities and marginalised experiences and, in the public space in front of an audience, builds allies in order to amplify the political message.

These videos evidence both my playful experimentation with the form as well as my identity. Indeed, this type of multimodality draws attention to that playfulness: which self is being

presented now? What “woman” do they see? This example of reciprocal performing makes it clear that everything users see on screen is a “performance”: live spoken word, filmed “talking torso” videos, even words on the screen. The audio-visual features draw particular attention to juxtapositions in appearance, voice and demeanour which are important signifiers of self-image outside of narrative content. These apparent contradictions might confuse the audience about the image or identity I am trying to (re)present, causing them to question whether these performances and therefore my experiences are authentic or truthful. Yet personal storytelling of this kind involves communicating known cultural, collective stories or discourses about (gender) identity as a playful performative method. In addition to the thematic macro focus on gender and socio-cultural expectations consistent throughout my performances, the audio-visual elements are vitally important for visual self-presentation as micro level gender performativity, making it clear that these performances and therefore identities are all part of my lived experience.

Furthermore, these performances are not mutually exclusive; they have a mutually beneficial relationship, creating multi-layered representations of digital poetry, performance and identity politics. The creation and distribution of multimodal videos not only evidences playful changes, developments or improvements in my performance as a poet or digital creative, but also my playful experiments with fluid identity performances making these accessible and therefore recognisable to the public network. They are also mediated through my decisions to continue social media engagement and participation after initial posting, helping to maintain networked connections whilst also choosing how to maintain privacy.

The production and dissemination of my videos is informed by a desire to “problem-solve” the issue of “gender”, to disrupt the normative presumptions that women can only be one “thing”. As a digital archive, the videos evidence the valuable, formative outcomes of play where pluralistic identity performance is made visible as recursive multilinear narratives: a literal mapping of on-going self-construction and self-reflection that (re)presents and (re)tells my (dis)continuous identity experiments (Frank 2010). Playful on-screen performativity and social media participation hybridise allowing me to assess, synthesise and evaluate the constructions, contradictions and conflicts of my lived experiences as a woman, which do not

comply with straightforward hegemonic dichotomies and cross social barriers. Therefore, my multimodal performances evidence a “personal media practice” (Lundby 2008) whereby I am able to construct active selves demonstrating that identity is something you “do” rather than something you are (van Zoonen 2013).

As evidenced, postdigital ludic practice utilises the conventions of autobiographical vlogs (video blogs) which have the potential to (re)present subaltern groups and by doing so represents challenge to dominant, normative perceptions (van Dijck 2013). This provides a convincing justification for how postdigital ludic practice operates to create “viral counterpublics” (Somers-Willett 2014), a discursive space not only for the articulation and interpretation of the performer’s identity, but also affecting the on-going process of reciprocal identity construction within the networked community. Postdigital ludic practice claims space for this incongruous dynamism whilst creating opportunities for complex audience engagement. Multimodal viewing strategies and social media participation not only effects audiences’ perceptions of on-screen performances, but perceptions of their own performances and participations. A digital video of a spoken word performance is an open text with polysemic potential, simultaneously comprised of the open hybrid form of the multimodal performance itself, the unique multi-linear pathways that internet users must navigate in order to discover the video and also, the changeable nature of internet access conditions. The video diffuses amongst a myriad of haphazard, seemingly aimless and thus obfuscated digital exchanges where a single recognisable political agenda or movement is not always pronounced, evidenced, nor important in a variety of multimodal forms, touching a wide array of progressive issues (Chepp 2016).

Prescient transparency: postdigital ludic practice challenges the idea that a literary work can be finished or understood; there is no final signified. Through various modes and processes it may appear to seek clarity where there can be none and these structures and processes make this clear.

The actions outlined above make it clear why this cannot be possible: the writer is always moving, always performing within networks, so too is the writing. The writer can account for the challenges posed by polysemy with openness about the literary-ludic texts' simultaneously complimentary and contradictory iterations and manifestations; being clear about the tools and methods used in its developments, as and when these emerge and evolve; making "problems" or contradictions visible within the text. A writer may aspire to and pursue a formal publishing contract which involves creating a text which is worthy of publication: it is a complete original without errors or inconsistencies; and this may have implications for the way the writer not only presents this finished work but the processes and practices involved in order to complete it, in order to meet those traditional standards and expectations. A postdigital ludic writer may also be motivated by the same goals and standards but will also utilise alternative frameworks or models of "publishing" already acknowledged in this chapter: social media posting, videos, impromptu and unscheduled spoken word performances. These practices and processes will be recorded as part of the process; they are not discrete, finished items which result in a final finished text. They are also no less important or necessary than the traditional analogue publication; there is no hierarchy. Arguably this traditional model encourages audiences to focus simply on the creative artefact, the "masterpiece" rather than the complicated methods and stratified systems utilised in its production. Postdigital ludic practice democratises this space by being candid about the processes and practices, including the problems and challenges, that inform the artistic expressions it produces. A postdigital ludic writer is frank about all of their movements and performances.

This honesty is, to varying degrees, always a feature of literary-ludic texts: (re)discovery of multiple forms, referents and vulnerabilities is part of its allure. Postdigital ludic practice is informed by a self-aware, self-critical consciousness which contributes to the continuous turbulent shifts and developments in practice and form whilst representing the intensity of the posthuman condition, which was defined in the previous chapter. Thus, this practice might be considered visionary sublime: it is not simply about creative or literary prowess which inspires or impresses users or audiences, its honesty is deeply affecting and embodied.

Postdigital Ludic Practice Continues to Emerge

The list that follows acknowledges other ludic tools and methods utilised during my writing experiments, although not present in every writing moment or occasion of creativity. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, vigorous movement, reciprocal performing and prescient transparency are considered ubiquitous to postdigital ludic practice, yet the following tools and methods were more difficult to discern and evidence consistently, however they still make an important and significant contribution to understanding and articulating the writing practices of digital writers. Once again, they are written in the continuous present because these activities, similarly to the three already discussed, are ongoing and do not operate in discreet stages as in traditional writing practices. Postdigital ludic practice is a continuously metamorphosing assemblage of activities and outcomes including those but not limited to those listed here.

Architecting: literary-ludic texts are comprised of many multimodal elements that may be disseminated across many platforms. To weave and splice these elements together, a postdigital ludic writer must configure the work's "ludic mechanics" (Ensslin 2014: 11-12) and pathways creating a geography of digital spaces that connect these dispersed elements and pathways. This activity ensures that the text is ludic and interactive.

Violen)t Existence is a digital archive which consists of a home website, built using open-source software through WordPress and hyperlinks to multiple social networks, blog entries, lyrical essays, news sources, journal articles and websites. The content across all platforms is multimodal. The postdigital ludic writer not only writes, drafts, edits and creates the literary "text" but must plan, map, build and code its multiple multimodal and ludic components and connections.

Prospecting: referring to activities and approaches associated with "mining" physical and virtual networks for the benefit of the writing practice, the reciprocal community of creatives and the literary-ludic text. Writers must seek and find opportunities, that is "prospects" in order to make connections and extend their own network; to research themes and issues for the text's content but also for the text's shape and form; for further inspiration. This approach

drives the practice in all directions as the writer engages in vigorous movement and reciprocal performing, creating more and more connections and collecting more fragments. The writer then decides where to go next, using their intuition to pursue leads, (re)discover fragments and continue to build their creation. As a postdigital ludic writer, I actively pursued prospects which would extend my writing (researching themes and issues) and my networks (making physical and virtual connections).

Foraging: whilst prospecting, the writer must “forage” unfamiliar territories, exploring the unknown and potentially uncomfortable. They must allow themselves to be surprised by various unexpected physical and virtual places and spaces. The writer must search widely, realising that even when they perceive themselves not to be searching or exploring perhaps in a context or location that they had not initially perceived as inspirational or formative, that they are. One role that the writer must reciprocally perform is that of scout. Prospecting might be part of a research or creative plan motivated by inspiration or seeking the answer to a research question, foraging then is more uncertain, more surprising, unforeseeable and daunting than this.

Although I had not initially perceived that the performance of my writing in unpredictable circumstances (that being times and locations) might be inspirational or formative for future writing developments, it was for numerous reasons. When performing my work in a context not promoted as a “Reading” or “Event”, a context not expected by the people in the space, I was more nervous. This audience were not expecting my performance and it was something I had not tried before. Naturally this affected my performance style and delivery, as compared with my “typical”, scheduled spoken word performances. This led to a different reading of the poems even for me, the writer: how might these unpredicted responses be reflected and represented in their digital iterations? This resulted in the digital presentation of the poem on the digital page, when compared to its printed version, as echoing the changes that could be witnessed, heard and compared via different YouTube videos of the same poem, performed in different locations. The poems on the digital page attempt to account for the variations in pitch, volume and breath which can be witnessed when comparing the various live performances. Thus, these poems also perform differently across digital and printed pages, in that their typography is also different.

Fossicking: the networks yield a lot of material and can produce endless directions for the writer to pursue. The writer must stay alert and be able to collect and archive research, fragments, pieces and traces without judgement; any pejorative decision would contradict prescient transparency. Material should not be permanently discarded; it should be recorded and filed for potential future ludic engagement. Fragments that are used can also be recycled, sampled across networks and used to create layers and loops which may orientate users through their literary-ludic text and its various pathways. The writer is guided only by their intuition, their networks and the evolving potential of the fragments that will create the work and provide intrinsic value. In this regard, I had to research, record and respond without commercial intent; that is to say, *Violen)t Existence* is not driven by the commercial success of *Violet Existence*, nor as a “publication” in its own right.

Synaesthetic synchronicity with machines: the writer must be “in synch” with technology, using them to produce and record bodily senses and stimulations. The writer should move and talk with machines, learning to appreciate both their human and machine bodies as interconnected intuitive systems which extends the writer’s capacities, potentialities and therefore movements and senses. This is achieved when the writer uses machines to remix their own voice or manipulate their physical appearance; this modifies the writer’s physical presence within the text and evidences a networked body combined of writer, machine and “body” of digital work. It also applies to the touches and gestures required to engage with machines, which operate as meaningful systems of signification in and of themselves. It articulates the embodied intimacy between humans and machines which is fundamental to this creative process.

Violen)t Existence not only represents my performance through audio-visual elements but also combines the voices and “performance” of Siri and my Google Home Hub. The answers to research questions provided by these digital “assistants” not only provided new research pathways, but their responses were recorded verbatim using a smart phone and then integrated into the digital text, as another persona performing within the text. These sound files were also sampled and remixed with my own voice and at times, overlaid with royalty

free music and ambient sounds recorded whilst out walking to create a soundscape within the work.

Haptic consciousness: as attempts to structure and understand all the collected fragments and research, juxtapositions, nonlinear and multilinear pathways, and network interactions, the writer engages in tactile thinking when probing and investigating their archives and intentionally physically and cognitively reacting to stimuli. This is a process of fluid brainstorming where the writer can take some control over the material, deconstructing it and working it into a new shape. This is evidenced through mixed-media crafting as a response to fragments and, including them as multimodal elements in the text, as explained in the previous example.

Asynchronous Dispersion and Dissemination: as noted, the postdigital ludic writer is not motivated by traditional publishing; therefore, the writer must take on the role of disseminating the work and dispersing it across virtual and physical networks themselves. These actions are “out of synch” in that there is no precise right way of sharing the work, again becoming another ludic experiment. The writer can instantly post fragments of the work to multiple platforms simultaneously, whilst also scheduling physical performances for the future. The writer should avoid prioritising or favouring a certain network as this may limit the work’s potential to spread. To encourage proliferation writers should experiment with different combinations of distribution opportunities. My own experiments have included different combinations of distribution opportunities: utilising my YouTube channel; using my Twitter (now X) profile to draw attention to new content; using Microsoft Teams to create space for online performance and through the shared screen function, integrating multimodal visual elements into the performance.

Acquiescing to the networks: the postdigital ludic writer must surrender to the networks once they have shared their work. Accepting that they have no control over the text once it is amongst networks is intimidating. However relinquishing control and embracing the unknown empowers the writer: once they’ve let go of a text, they are free to pursue another; setting the text free can reveal new understanding in the functionality of the networks, its structures and patterns; it may also create and strengthen reciprocity. These new experiences

might divert the writer's attention from insecurities related to making a text public. Continued capitulation can help to develop trust and a sense of intimacy amongst vast, public networks and, therefore potentially enhance the writer's understanding of their own work. This does not simply occur in digital spaces. In live performances, I asked the audience to shout out their first thoughts immediately after I've spoken; I then integrated these responses into the next digital iteration of the text, treating them as "found" material.

Referential Paralleling: the postdigital ludic writer creates bodies of work composed of nonlinear and multi-linear networks and pathways; these are playful but also challenging for users. A writer can build connections which help to give some sense of shape to the work through overt and covert patterns, codes, motifs, references to themselves and others. These might be visual signs or textual clues that obscure meaning whilst also revealing it; each time a trace is (re)discovered it provides new meaning helping the work to "make sense". These multiple referents become the language of the work, a private language shared by the writer and its reciprocal networks, therefore creating intimacy between writer and users and having intrinsic value.

In the presentation and design of *Viole(n)t Existence* I utilised a recurring colour palette associated with sunrise and sunset across the body of the work including written in hybrid poems and visual imagery such as photographs and films. As is often used in poetry, I included repeated lines or phrases throughout the work, but chose to experiment with different fonts and typography, as well as "performing" these same lines in different "voices" (both my own and those of machines). I intentionally created ambiguity in relation to themes and social issues explored within the text(s), allowing users to perceive them as science-fiction, only for them to discover links to news articles and scientific research that proves they exist and have happened already.

As already noted, this cannot be considered a finite list; after all it is only based on one experience. It does, however, provide a starting point for further discussions on specific tools and methods that manifest as "postdigital ludic practice" with a purpose of creating digital, multimodal literary-ludic texts. These tools and methods are meant to reflect the omniscience

of the postdigital ludic practitioner to create a body of work which functions as an assemblage of metamorphosing networked fragments.

It is worth remembering that providing a functional register for postdigital ludic practice has a dual purpose: practical tools and methods for writers; and a contribution to the discourse on theoretical modes of literary-ludic analysis as it can be purposefully deployed as critical-creative hybrid practice.

Postdigital Ludic Practice as Activism: posthuman transformations

Utilising the methods and tools outlined, postdigital ludic practice might be considered an act of activism. Activism is a new way of achieving social engagement using innovation and artistic creation outside of the Academy, appearing in social spaces in hybrid forms as a means for moving towards change and social transformation. It is a new social discourse that breaks with traditional roles, positions, activities and communications (Aladro-Vico et al. 2018: 9). Similarly, to postdigital ludic practice, activism is identified as an artistic activity for the purpose of immediate social intervention (Expósito 2013), working within a specific context whilst playing with the connotations of the entities that compose it (Abarca 2006). Activism occupies spaces and spheres of activity traditionally rendered anonymous and invisible including urban areas, transport hubs, non-places or sites that have lost their meaning (Augé 2009); it does not seek to exhibit itself in museums and galleries. Here lies another apparent similarity: the postdigital ludic writer “publishes” their work via the myriad computational networks that comprise pervasive Web 3.0. In particular postdigital ludic writing engages with digital spaces that can often appear devoid of meaning, integrity, or “soul” because of their globalised commercial associations or ephemera (re)creating simulacra of popular cultural trends or fads, such as is evidenced in viral memes, as such they are “non-places”. As formations of mercantilism and extreme examples of the reification of culture, these digital spaces become anonymous and invisible. Postdigital ludic practice as activism invades these contexts through non-totalising play, being provocatively simultaneously subjective and social, inclusionary and exclusionary, and generating formative embodied connections with users.

Both activism and postdigital ludic writing are symptomatic of liquid modernity (Bauman 2007) where “destructive creation and creative destruction converge in the same act” (Bauman 2007: 43). As an example of activism, postdigital ludic writing highlights the progressive loss of representational capacity in the mass society, which has resulted in the disenchantment and dissolution of political symbolism (Dayan 1998) leading to a lack of faith in traditional processes. Postdigital ludic writing radically ruptures the structure of this communication through its commitment to breaking with the structures of conventional creative writing and traditional canonical literature. It therefore recreates a social space that connects the writer and their users in new ways (Kombarov 2017: 5). This humanises the space and generates a creative environment (Garnier 2012) which extends to the body of the audience as they too rediscover public space and a perceptible social existence⁶. This mobilises users to take an active and participatory role as new territories are made thinkable, made possible (Segura-Cabañero and Simó-Mulet 2017).

Postdigital ludic practice can be considered collaborative as its practices produce a body of work marked by both creative individuality and collective construction. The “consumption” of literary-ludic texts by physical networks (other writers, live audiences, mentors for example) and digital “friends” or “followers” is challenged, arguing instead that audience engagement with these forms of writing requires interaction and participation due to the requirements of the core functionality of the very platforms they are published to⁷. Furthermore, it asserts that this form of engagement is a form of creativity in itself: actively “prosuming” (Toffler 1980; Jenkins and Ford et al. 2013), that is simultaneously producing and consuming rather than passively consuming. Digital users (instead of “readers” or “audience”) become active collaborators in the writing practice once it is dispersed amongst digital platforms that comprise the unpredictable internet network. This means that the writing develops in new ways and takes on different shapes (and by this, we mean those unforeseen or initially intended by the original writer⁸), moving in multiple directions and adding to its

⁶ As opposed to the previously noted decentred, dislocated existential angst associated with postmodern decentring as defined by Hall and du Gay (2003).

⁷ This was initially recognised by Jenkins (2008) in relation to the “convergence culture” which emerged as a result of participatory web functionality associated with the Web 2.0 iteration of the internet where web content flowed across multiple platforms and social media platforms emerged demanding user generated content.

⁸ This was defined by Barthes as the “writerly text” (1970: 4).

multimodality as a result of liking, commenting, sharing, modifying by “friends” and “followers”; behaviours themselves which might also be considered forms of postdigital ludic practice. We can say with some certainty that once the writing is published to such a platform it is an unpredictable creation on an unknowable networked trajectory.

Social media engagement is a fundamental part of our contemporary digital culture and social life (Fuchs 2014), so postdigital ludic practice in this sense exemplifies contemporary creative and artistic behaviours, whilst also being inextricably linked to the realities of our social norms and interactions. This intersection between art and popular culture⁹ suggests that this type of practice has the potential to not only generate writing that is informed by social discussion and conversation around the themes and issues explored within the writing, but also that the modes of these discussions enter into the work to become fundamental aspects of its composition. Postdigital ludic practice might help to develop new knowledge of writing tools and methods, writing forms, digital functionality and also of the society that creates and interacts with it. Therefore, the experience is formative with transformative potential: writers and collaborators use technology rather than being used by it.

Activist interactions with digital networks, such as likes, shares, comments, re-posting although seemingly ephemeral, operate at deep levels of human experience and beyond dominant imaginaries to establish new ways of facing human experience (De-Gonzalo and Perez-Prieto 2008, cited in Aladro-Vico et al. 2018). Each reciprocal action is an act of social intervention catalysing a transgressive symbolic (re)construction of reality that liberates both postdigital ludic writer and users from commodified views of life, and thus openly challenges Dean’s (2005) discussion of the exploitative nature of “communicative capitalism”. Instead adopting playful, generous visions and potentialities which enable all participants to become aware of their own power.

⁹ This might be interpreted as the blurring of a traditional canonical boundary perhaps, yet moreover technology, specifically the internet has allowed for greater and further-reaching interactions between people and the unknown (unknown information and content; unknown “friends”). Writing in this context therefore must involve the unknown and relinquishing control to the “art” to the unpredictable nature of contemporary digital culture.

Digital networks are ready-made communities for postdigital ludic writers and their collaborators to participate in. Initially the postdigital ludic writer might share and post material with their “friends”, other creatives and organisations each with their own digital presence or footprint with the potential to share the work more widely, outside the writers’ original network. Due to Web 3.0 algorithms, posts, likes and comments place the work in the sight of an audience that would not typically find themselves engaging with literary-ludic content, yet now find themselves watching a video via Twitter, for example and all that is required for participation and evaluation is internet access; affective bonds manifest and are mediated through these sharing features (Karppi 2018). Whoever originally posts the video builds their own digital infrastructure around that post, which helps to spread and sustain its presence amongst a wider circulation in unpredictable ways, thus arguably furthering the potential of and commitment to counter-discourse.

The previous chapter described how digital poetry operates within “viral counterpublics” (Somers-Willett 2014) when discussing how users exchange and disclose information online particularly if they are interested in creating further dialogues (Jenkins et al. 2013: 58-59): creating, posting, locating, commenting on and re-posting digital content draws attention to playful behaviours as an attempt to fulfil individual desires and needs whilst sometimes unintentionally and unexpectedly fulfilling the needs of a collective. These digital performances and cultural “conversations” build social connections, provide validation for creative practice and of selfhood and can inspire action. These actions and behaviours evidence the aforementioned affective bonds (Karppi 2018). This creates an alternative participatory network of one-to-one and many-to-many relationships which centre on informal interactions that combine skills, knowledge and understanding and create common relationships with shared texts (Meikle and Young 2012). The mutually valuable, reciprocal community operates as an alternative source of intelligence and power where the potential for cultural and political change can be found: a digital “public sphere” connecting the self to society and the personal to the political (Papacharissi 2010: 164). This counters the argument that these types of playful participation are simply depoliticised acts of technological fetishism and instruments for communicative capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2001; Dean 2005).

The potential for viral counterpublics to create space for marginalised, liminal identities who are not afforded space by mainstream culture, is interesting to me not just from the perspective of being a woman, but also as a digital writer and spoken word performer where there are not as many opportunities to publish widely, due to those previously acknowledged pre-conceived notions of “Literature” and the Canon. The processes of becoming digital poetry which includes combinations of moving image recorded on a smart phone, text, music and the non-linear interactions this creates challenges institutional barriers created by the Academy, and capitalist barriers created by the conventional publishing model (Barnard 2017:14-16).

As a performer and creative, I am able to take advantage of the multimodal medium as an example of “making and doing culture” (Gauntlett 2011: 11). My low-budget, on-screen performance “productions” created by me as the performer which are then “published” to the internet connects me, as the performer to heterogeneous communities and networks not motivated by financial gain but the desire to engage in dialogue and share (Jenkins et al. 2013: 58-59). Arguably these shareable productions appeal to other storytellers of various forms and styles; and also, considering the relatively new paradigm of online social media protest, activism and hashtag politics (Shirky 2008) to those socio-politically engaged who oppose social prejudices. Therefore, I am connected to an unpredictable, frenetic communication structure beyond the possibilities of mainstream page publishing, where, for example a performance posted to YouTube operates within a rhizomatic network that accumulates political allies: the wider the video spreads, the more potential it has to change minds (Terranova and Donovan 2013: 297).

Postdigital ludic practice takes place between complex, intersecting networks of data and technology that move from one body through technology to other bodies, feeding-forward into future patterns of collective activity (Tucker 2018: 35-40). The online space amplifies the work to large networks outside of traditional institutions and organisations, building relationships and communities where a single recognisable political agenda or movement is not always pronounced, evidenced, nor important; digital multimodal texts diffuse amongst a myriad of haphazard, seemingly aimless and thus obfuscated exchanges touching a wide array of progressive issues (Chepp 2016: 47). This type of practice has the potential to connect

writers and users with numerous local, national and global organisations all accessible through networks, in co-ordinated and uncoordinated ways, to take collective action on- and offline.

Postdigital ludic practice in this sense creates another challenge to cultural hegemonies whereby participatory practice fosters countercultural, grassroots atmospheres animating others as a non-hierarchical social network of potential creative collaborators (Jenkins 2008: 274-275). Although initially perceived as a constructed, edited commercial space, social media platforms are dynamic, affective spaces; viral counterpublics where communication, art, “performance” is democratised and decentralised and users persistently engage in critical exchanges, posting thoughts and contributions about the content. Social media platforms and their associated software tools provide critical outlets for digital users, where conversations about the writer, writing, literary-ludic writing, identities, experiences and reception in varying degrees and sometimes uncritical ways are clearly evidenced, and thus stimulate potentially unconscious socio-political discussions.

What emerges from these exchanges is a decentralised network of horizontal communications which are non-hierarchical and centred on the group, rather than individuals, and are thematically unknown in advance, even to the original postdigital ludic writer. Even if the writer declares a central, identifiable theme or set of core values in their work, these may be altered or obscured once the work is made live in the digital network, where there is no explicit leader with a specific obligation; this in and of itself can be considered a political act. Postdigital ludic practice creates the potential for a nuanced, expansive, on- and offline network of communities to cultivate, knowingly or not, transgressive potential, therefore it constructs political spaces. For these reasons it is a form of activism. This concept recognises postdigital ludic practice as a significant cultural phenomenon, even though, paradoxically it inherently challenges “culture” as it is not restricted by subjectivity and language and instead prioritises creativity, playfulness and innovation. Seemingly resisting definition by its nature, it is useful to reconsider postdigital ludic practice within the context of posthuman frameworks of knowledge, which acknowledge the viral process of destroying the self, the social system and communication in order to create open possibilities (Wolfe 2009).

The outcomes of postdigital ludic practice exist in the “in-between” where it is neither a traditional “live” performance, nor a single multimodal “event” (Carpenter 2017: 103): the viral network ensures that the video is different each time it is accessed due to the endless, unpredictable combination of social, cultural and technological factors including the motivation for searching out this type of content, levels of digital literacy and access context. Postdigital ludic practice releases creatives from the restrictions of physical bodies, being digitally connected or re-embodied through the computer and its interminable viral networks. These digitally embodied communities are simultaneously engaged in creativity, producing content, but also active consumption, where reciprocal participation is required to recognise and interpret the open polysemic potentialities of viral counterpublics. Postdigital ludic practice as digital embodiment is a creative practice that reveals the “performer”, “user” or “creative” to be an ambiguous collection of complex and interactive selves collaborating on an artistic project beyond the digital poem itself and is a creative form of resistance.

This chapter has suggested how postdigital ludic practice disturbs, displaces and disrupts the status quo; the dehiscence of Literature, art, culture, identity for example, to create the extensive potential for resisting the permanence of any hegemonic structure or discourse. It utilises some of these structures (literary form for example), privileged terms (e.g. “writer” for example) and discursive modes of power (e.g. “publishing”) only to contaminate and transform them. Therefore, it is simultaneously and paradoxically an act of destruction and recursive creation, where self-referential autopoiesis is made possible. Autopoietic systems, or “bodies” function as a network of destruction and transformation which through their interactions can continuously regenerate, whilst also being able to recognise the processes which produced them (Valera 1979). These bodies are only possible because they are part of both open and closed systems; they are recontextualised posthuman bodies (Braidotti 2022), sometimes organic, sometimes digital, sometimes multidimensional virtualities, liberated to negotiate subversive potentialities and creativities which perpetually stimulates an “intensive politics of becoming” (Ruffolo 2016: 20). The practice cannot be reduced to debates and analysis of subjugated subjectivities, subjects-as-beings and Cartesian philosophy, though language as the practice creates systems of continuous production which expose and reframe, where no primacy is given to articulating a “self”. As such postdigital ludic practice involves the deconstruction of culture and identity, generating and regenerating new bodies which by

this principle of “openness from closure” (Wolfe 2009: xxi), makes such acts culturally representative: what appears to separate us from “culture”, connects us to that culture. These transformative affects are best understood as play: creative thinking and problem solving without agenda which mobilises endless dynamic assemblages.

Postdigital ludic practice is a multiplicitous assemblage of playful experiments and spaces. These networked “bodies” continue to produce ongoing tensions which compromise stable conceptions of the individual “writer” and “culture” (Massumi 2001: 814). This practice is not so concerned with what these “bodies” are, but what they do, that is oppose power through the playful creation of new discontinuous political connections. Thus, the practice does not simply (re)produce meanings but articulates the potential for producing perpetually metamorphosing creative desires for their own playful sake. That is to say that writers (nor their collaborators) do not need to identify and define political transformations (I.E. “activism”) specifically or precisely; engaging in playful practice (I.E. “art”) for intrinsic value (rather than extrinsic such as seeking publication, for example), even if appearing futile is a valuable transformation in itself: acts of activism. This is further exemplified in the next chapter: the lyric essay as opposed to (expected) “traditional” discussion chapter as another extension of *Violen)t Existence*.

This chapter has attempted to recognise the potential of postdigital ludic practice by articulating some of the multimodal tools and methods which informed my own digital writing experiences. To reiterate, this is not to be considered a definitive discourse but a starting point for digital writers who wish to engage in playful experiments with postdigital writing and the composition of hybrid literary-ludic texts, whilst acknowledging that this form necessitates revisions of “traditional” writing practice helping writers “to engage effectively and productively with new media technologies” (Barnard 2017: 286). As noted, postdigital ludic practice demands self-reflexivity so that writers can (re)orientate themselves within perpetually shifting networks (of “friends”, platforms, hardwares and softwares), therefore it is a practice that will certainly continue to change shape. This chapter also contributes to the on-going theoretical discussions associated with play and literary-ludic form.

This chapter paid careful attention to the “problems” of defining play as imaginative and illusionary experimentation that naturally resists stable definition. It might therefore be difficult to grasp the significance of postdigital ludic writing, yet as this chapter has explained, this is its social function. This practice does not prioritise one hegemonic system or “body” (writer/reader, page/internet publication, oppressive capitalism/creative freedom, for example) therefore it has the potential to create bodies which change shape and direction continuously and these bodies might be considered transformative networks or spaces. This sense of disunity and heterogeneity reconceives privileged notions of “writing” and “human” as emerging and multiplicitous, rather than defined by single ideal definitions or perspectives. These “imperfections” are why it is useful to consider postdigital ludic practice as an assemblage of activist posthuman experiences with the potential to catalyse new “becomings” which paradoxically help writers and their users to make sense of their chaotic everyday experiences and existence. Continued discussions of this potential, as well as continued reflections on the perpetually shifting tools and methods of the practice are required in order to continue the assessment of postdigital ludic practice, especially as notable evidence of the playful behaviours inherent (not liminal nor disconnected from) within (gamified) culture and its outcomes and effects.

Creative Artefact

Both the website, ***Violen)t Existence*** and the page publication, ***Violet Existence*** are submitted as the creative components of this research: products of my writing experiments with the critical-creative hybrid tools and methods of postdigital ludic practice.

The website can be accessed here: <https://violetexistence.co.uk/>

The page poems were published by Broken Sleep Books in 2022 (<https://www.brokensleepbooks.com/product-page/katy-wareham-morris-violet-existence>) and are submitted as a PDF.

The following chapter presented in this thesis (Experiments in Creative Criticality: Establishing the Posthuman Potentialities of Postdigital Ludic Practice) is the page version of the lyric essay which is one of the digital components of *Violen)t Existence*. The reason for both its page and digital iterations is to exemplify the postdigital slippage in literary cultures, whilst also demonstrating how postdigital ludic practice can be deployed as a tool for the postdisciplinary practices of the critical posthumanities and simultaneously maintain its critical-creative hybridity. It also demonstrates how the potentialities of postdigital ludic practice are purposefully explored and demonstrated through a practice-led approach. The reasons for this have been explained in the previous chapters and are also explored in the essay itself. To protect formatting it is also submitted as a PDF.

Experiments in Creative Criticality: Establishing the Posthuman Potentialities of Postdigital Ludic Practice.

I come to this after sitting in all types of hell. I've started, then stopped in all of these places

—

the coffee shop (with and without John)
the old house
the new house
the kitchen
the study which is actually the loft
the office which is actually a cell
the garden
the poetry
the essay
the book
the network
between

the binary code of my very existence
viole(n)t or otherwise

(I think that's a joke just for me)

1 / 0
student / Senior Lecturer
1 / 0
daughter / wife
1 / 0
mother / working mum
1 / 0
able / disabled
1 / 0
cash poor / love rich
1 / 0
cash rich / love poor
1 / 0
a fantasy writer / a real academic
1 / 0
working class / working class roots
1 / 0
creative / critical
1 / 0
critical / creative

A tale of my existence, literally

perhaps not.

A writing down of what's gone on, still going: a notable act to stay in the continuous present. There are no findings if you're still finding. A writing down of this then, whatever *this* is. A writing down to make sense and there is a lot of pressure to make sense with these types of things. A (male) Prof. said to me last week, make it "plausible" and I'm not sure if this ever was, ever will be. I can only think of what happened and try to tell it as I see and if I don't see it, I can make it up, as long as it's "plausible".

A writing down instead of a writing up because I'm still excavating: what might be there, what might be perceived, what might have a name and a tradition and standards. Or digging down deeper, making wild discoveries which do not have names, traditions and standards until you name them, "plausibly". I might decide not to do that after all. This is hell.

We have been everywhere this thing and me. From the Ancient to the Early Modern; churning in the modern, deciding when the postmodern began; giving in to the decentring when we pitched up in the digital age. From this I discovered (*a finding?*) that I'm good at note-taking: I like a highlighter and a colourful pen. I'm good at collecting, commonplacing because I start again and again and again. I'm good at nurturing my ideas which are rhizoming because one is never enough. I'm coding because nothing lasts forever, even when you call it "history". I'm collaborating because survival means not being alone and there is always a question of who is writing this (*or at least it was for ethics!*). Who is writing this down? Will it ever be written up?

We can think about what's happened, how we perceive it. If we can't, we could make it up, make it "plausible". We could spend our lives chasing it.

It might be easier to live without language, without ~~writing~~. It might be easier to feel it. To conjure the missing via visceral intimacy. A non-fiction for a post-truth ~~phantasmagoric~~.

This is a commitment to writing it down, but only as another body in the assemblage of commonplaced, rhizomed, coded, often missing ~~bodies~~

This will have its own limbs, its own disease, its own family. It will perform. I know this for sure –
this is about bodies.

Now I start again, in hell. Maybe when I stop, I will be somewhere / something else

Postdigital Ludic Practice as a Creative Critical Hybrid Framework

The previous chapter sought to justify the necessary revisions of a “traditional” writing methodology within a contemporary culture that is ludic (Zimmerman 2015) and posthuman (Braidotti 2013, 2017); that writing methodology was called postdigital ludic practice. This chapter will explore the potential of postdigital ludic practice as a critical toolkit operating within that same culture. The previous chapter articulated the potential of the practice as activism: actively seeking to simultaneously utilise established discourses, histories and structures only to subvert and reshape them. This potential was informed by my playful experiences as a ~~writer poet-performer~~ postdigital ludic practitioner. Importantly the chapter concluded that there can be no definition, no conclusion: the tools and methods are not exhaustive nor exclusive; they are only just beginning

to eat the supreme feast offered up by a menu of hegemonies:
bodies unbirthed scrambling
in directions
that threaten to explode them.

This menu satiates *humans*

~~white~~
~~able-bodied~~
~~heteronormative~~
~~men~~

These bodies want to eat and eat and eat and eat

are imperfectly

still becoming

their problem

Postdigital ludic practice as a critical methodology remains in conversation with established modes of close reading and literary theory whilst seeking to rupture those established modes of analysis, if only to establish that a literary–ludic text’s potential cannot be formally analysed nor concluded. This is because its playful characteristics are changeable, and almost impossible to accurately and substantially discern. Thus, postdigital ludic practice is playful in and of itself, not existing simply to recognise the playful conditions that created the literary–ludic text and afford its “publication”; nor to articulate its playful features or characteristics. Although engaging with established critical modes and approaches, it does not prioritise these; it purposefully creates gaps in the “analysis” enabling other critical “bodies”, those named and known to the Academy and those unnamed, unclaimed – the missing – to emerge.

It is a weird assemblage of

becoming	human/non–human/more–than–human/all too human/ posthuman	collaborators
		cognition
		imagination
		affect
		capitalist
hegemonies		computational
networks		
	Major Science	
	minor science	
developing		
growing		
	(re)inventions	
	inter	
	post	
	extra	
	trans	
	disciplinary	

n o m a d i c f l o w s

euphoria /
despair /
excitement /
fear /
anxiety /
[hell](#)
[hell](#)
[hell](#)
[hell](#)
[hell](#)

endurance
persistence

Here is another “problem” with play. As the creative writing practice does not prioritise systems or “bodies”, creating potentially transformative spaces where “writing” can be reconceived and continuously emerge, neither does the critical practice. Postdigital ludic practice has the potential to respond to elusive “readings” which too change shape and direction; interpretations may or may not exist. Their multiplicity, their imperfections, their mutability mirror the chaos not only of the text but the culture which produces it and them. This is a posthuman culture.

This chapter asserts that postdigital ludic practice of any kind is activism: it creates rhizomatic knowledges, or “bodies” simultaneously creative and critical – creativecritical. By its nature, postdigital ludic practice is incomplete, imperfect and always becoming...

We’re moving dangerously close towards a “conclusion” here (*already?*), but as explained in the previous chapter, activism is used only to acknowledge what *might* be possible.

The type of textual potential offered by literary–ludic texts has been recognised to some extent by existing analytical frameworks, namely those associated with “Critical Studies” which emerged in the Humanities between the 1990s and 2000s. These Studies include but are not limited to: gender, queer, cultural, critical disability... And remained in dialogue with many of the poststructuralist positions acknowledged in the previous chapters as fundamental context for understanding the motivations and developments of my creative practice

(remember when I gave you some backstory?). This is the same Humanities that created space for digital literatures to exist in the first place. These are the critical “bodies” of knowledge or Major Sciences (Deleuze and Guattari 1994) that postdigital ludic practice collaborates and negotiates with; provokes and plays with; resists and destroys. They mean everything and nothing. They are the lovers we’ve loved and cannot get over because our sheets are dirty, so too our minds and bodies. At times, we endure the hurt, pain and rejection of the “bodies” that *still* cannot understand our potential. Therefore, this chapter explores the potential of postdigital ludic practice as multiple nonlinear acts of posthuman knowledge production (Braidotti 2019).

It is (dis)owned by histories / networks / families:

Critical Studies opened the Humanities’ eyes to the multi-layered lived experiences of the “others”

and then

Media Studies ensured that the Humanities appreciated the results of accelerated technological, capitalist social modalities

and then

These outcomes cross-bred and ceased to be and started to become...

and then

These new discursive practices developed serious scholarly credentials: they ticked the boxes for Major Science whilst recognising the multiple assemblages of...

and now

These new discursive practices are territorialised by neo-liberal market capitalism but

also design new nodes of
be

com

ing

and this is Critical Posthumanism.

Close reading is not used to being so multiplicitous and chaotic, but the irony is it makes sense. It makes sense within the context of the “posthuman condition” (Braidotti 2013, 2017), which is comprised of advanced capitalism and advanced technologies which have manifested the Earthly spectre known as the Anthropocene. Where to go and what to do in a culture which

relies on its intimacy with devices to make sense of the non-linear, (non? all-too?)human existence which reveals that this existence is hurtling towards disaster because of the intimacy with the devices they desire? This is the great paradox of the media-nature-culture continuum (Braidotti 2016). Postdigital ludic practice is a critical practice for the posthuman existing in this context: a way of doing, being, becoming. It cannot be isolated acts of close reading which fail to see this condition. It is not another act of humanist interpretation predicated on humanist values. This would limit its potential. Limit play. Limit the bodies that are contributing and will contribute.

This practice, in all its modes is m o v i n g

The only outcome is bodies: polyvocal assemblages of becoming

The excitement, the thrill, the pleasure of this type of close reading is also frustrating, painful and intolerable. Yet still it is intoxicating; the pursuit to articulate what cannot be accurately perceived continues on and on... the mind, the bodies become exhausted. But yet they play. They become and become and become

Therefore, (although there is no point to this at all) I will try to apply this postdigital ludic toolkit to reading *Violen)t Existence* which is only possible because of the tools and methods of this same postdigital ludic toolkit and so

(At this point, we should probably acknowledge the elephant in and on the page, space, network, Academy.) The traditional academic discussion chapter cannot work here, as part of this postdigital ludic “project”, in this posthuman, ludic culture. The “academic essay” is a fixed system established by an Academy that is still learning to love us; an Academy which cannot yet fully perceive the potential of open, non-goal orientated, non-profit driven, multidirectional, curiosity-driven play. Advocating for play is not the same: “plausibility” is not the same. The Humanities is still coming...

This is not, will not, cannot be an academic essay. This is a “finding”.

It *might* be a lyric essay, one that can barely be perceived as anything. Existing here and [here](#), as an essential component of *Viole(n)t Existence* – the online repository where the assemblage of postdigital bodies manifests most obviously and continuously. It is another dynamic literary–ludic text, which by its nature is playful and self–reflexive and never finished and

Everything is hybrid here

I may have just stated the obvious; that is at the very least plausible.

Postdigital Ludic Practice: Experiments in Creative Criticality

The previous chapter provided a rationale and context for three omnipresent writing activities, which (re)occurred repeatedly, even when difficult to discern, at various stages of the postdigital ludic writing practice. These activities were recorded and reflected on and, acknowledged as working alongside existing, more familiar “analogue” writing practices. In the same way that these activities were utilised to inspire and catalyse other creative writing practices, familiar or not, they will be used here to catalyse criticality, familiar or not. The tools and methods of postdigital ludic practice have been used to produce literary-ludic texts. Those same tools and methods will be used in this chapter to analyse those texts whilst also continuing to produce literary-ludic texts. Application of the tools and methods in this way functions as an operational critical toolkit; an analytical model for (posthuman) academics working in the field of digital literatures but

they must be willing to work with us, to love us for all our faults –
as we love their words, their rules whilst
playing housemaid to their insecurities.
They must be willing to change

Vigorous movement: It is clear from its various forms and iterations – here and [here](#) – that postdigital ludic analysis operates in virtual and physical networks which demand shifting perspectives of time and space. It exists online in fragments, as parts of creative bodies of work: in these temporalities its critical objectivity is questionable. Is this creative or critical work? Creativecritical work? Who is speaking here? Katy the writer or Katy the literary critic?

Katy the poet or Katy the scholar? Does it matter? What about the bodies? Whose body? Which body? Is the pursuit of a distinct, formal critical element or evaluation important? Perhaps not because it cannot be read continuously from beginning to definitive end, thus a sense of what might be understood and accepted as a justifiable and coherent argument is crucially undermined. Instead it is part of the chaotic network, so chaotic that as I say, it may not even be considered “critical” at all. But it’s not wrong.

Here,

on this page (who knows if you’re reading a printed version or a version on your screen, but either way, I mean in the “shape” of what is understood and recognised as an “essay”)

perhaps this critical movement can be more easily perceived. I have in the “traditional” sense drafted and redrafted, edited and shaped this “argument” in a linear way before I cut it up and threw it to the Essay network. I thought about grammar, about syntax and about paragraphing. I thought of how to shape the critical analysis; I thought about how to make it recognisable, in conversation but not in total agreement with literary critical traditions. There was a conscious effort to ensure that the critical element would move between these spaces, similarly to the way the creative work moves between their networks, their printed forms and their physical performances. The critical and creative works move together and separately, in tandem and independently, in similar and contrasting ways. They are bodies.

Vigorous movement is applied and evidenced through the critical appraisal of these bodies, through the forms and shapes that this critical appraisal takes. In this sense it is not so much about “findings” but the acknowledgement that these impressions must be constantly revised and (re)presented; they cannot be “finished”. The impressions change shape, direction and perspective because the text(s) which it aims to “analyse” is always changing shape. Simply, the critical “writing” or body of impressions must move. It cannot be fixed by the straightforward time and space of the word-processed, paragraphed “essay” form, although as shown here, it co-exists alongside it. For these reasons, there can be no right or wrong: no definitive way of conducting or writing up these impressions as a type of “analysis”. I said earlier that close reading is not used to such chaos but perhaps it can be made more

comfortable by acknowledging that this as an embodied and cognitive approach to metafiction.

This is perhaps crucial to your consideration of whether this toolkit is operating as a meaningful critical framework as well as a creative one. Would other scholars within the field of digital literatures consider this approach for conducting their critical analysis? Would they experiment with forms, structures and networks in this way? Are we ready for this? Am I providing a justifiable argument although perhaps *(and knowingly so)* not coherently? Does it only become “analysis” when it is presented as something recognisably “critical”? I think we have *(I hope we have)* moved beyond this although I was in a room last week when practice-based research was still being discussed/ defined/ debated.

Pause: to acknowledge that the Humanities and particularly literary scholarship has the credentials to explore new social imaginaries. Cultural representations and interpretations of humanity anyone? We love you literary Hums but

your “human” is

~~white~~
~~able-bodied~~
~~heteronormative~~
~~men~~

we are

feminist
anti-racist
post and decolonial
disabled
working class

thinkers
practitioners
collaborators
activists

non-human
more-than-human
all-too human

worthy

of our time

Anyway, for the purpose of this chapter, this project, creative / critical can no longer exist.

There is striking and sustained engagement with vigorous movement throughout Wareham Morris' work demonstrated through her purposeful and meaningful play with form and structure, places and spaces – on the page, the screen or physical such as bars, cafes, study spaces and, ironically silent zones. She actively seeks to orientate, disorientate and reorientate readers, users and audiences. At various locations throughout *Viole(n)t Existence* we are reminded that its “existence” is elsewhere, prompting readers, users and audiences to continue their textual investigations. Through the effective use of coding, hyperlinks and multimodality play is encouraged and can lead to the (re)discovery of more textual fragments. In fact, the text itself develops its own playful personality, as if surprising readers, users and audiences with yet more ways to play: don't just find me here, but here and there and there and there... This contributes to the self-conscious metafictional element of Wareham Morris' work and reinforces the complex and sophisticated layering of motifs and metaphor amongst these iterations, across platforms and spaces which are only discovered through physical and discernible movement, physical or virtual. This movement ensures that readers, users and audiences not only discover signifiers, but through their repetition can begin to make some sort of sense of them. Obviously: readers can move between pages; users can click different hyperlinks and move their mouse; audiences can move towards or away from an impromptu reading. Less obviously: networked bodies move alongside, away from, haphazardly, collectively in their discoveries. At times this is known, acknowledged and synchronous; at times it is not. Wareham Morris' body of work is a confident and convincing demonstration of vigorous movement where her play energies are transferred to the energies and therefore moves of her readers, users and audiences.

If the text's existence is elsewhere so too the writer's. The layering of imagery, as mentioned may deceive a reader into thinking they are getting to know the writer, getting closer to understanding Wareham Morris' “existence” only to discover that the layers also pull apart, fray, rip, burn. This confuses and frustrates the reader, user, audience: the “reading” experiences are too disorientating, too fragmented, too difficult to understand. This once again reinforces the metafictional element of *Viole(n)t Existence*: Wareham Morris cannot offer any “sense” because she cannot make sense of and for herself. For these reasons, her work exceeds typical

expectations of “poetry”, “performance” and “literature”, which adds another dimension to its central themes: the writer brings the themes to life, literally. The themes occupy the spaces, the networks, crucially the bodies of the text(s), which naturally necessitates a questioning of “existence” itself.

Now would be a good time to make that [move](#)

Reciprocal performing: If you haven’t already noticed this is all a performance and on more than one occasion, I act out my family’s affectionate moniker: “[drama queen](#)”.

Evidently Wareham Morris presents herself as many selves; the poetry confronts the pluralities and contradictions of womanhood in the contemporary age; the repercussions of young women in the 90s who were told they “could have it all” and now endure the associated traumas of that mythology. Furthermore, the composition of the text reveals further personae coalescing within this web of subjectivities, including videos of her as a performer. Users may find this version of the “writer” more arresting, more affective and gravitate towards this performance of selfhood because audio–visual content is more visually arresting (Fallis 2021) and after all, “seeing is believing” (Goldberg et al. 2019). Yet significantly, Wareham Morris also exists as a spectre within the texts as website coder and designer, responsible for the (initial) production and functionality of the text(s), therefore reminding users that they are more than a “writer”.

There is a conspicuous confidence in the examination of these roles; indeed the poetry is striking in its frank confrontation of the tensions which threaten the writer’s own sense of selfhood, their “existence”: a middle-aged [mother](#) (*affected and disaffected*); crippling early-career [imposter](#) syndrome (*seeded from a non-traditional route into academia via a working class background where no one understood the point of university anyway*); a naïve, young woman whose attempts to “[behave](#)” do not meet the required standards; a desire to shout when only [silence](#) is “appropriate”; a desire to live when [sickness](#) immobilises. And, then of course there is the presentation of World threats; a speculative element within the collection which draws upon global problems and tensions: war and conflict, nuclear armament, the climate crisis, pandemic. And, of course the problem that never went away: systemic patriarchy. This is most definitely about “existence” and what that those performances involve and how they are accounted for in the everyday lives of women living in a post #MeToo digital context,

where children are the future but only if there is one. The poetry confronts the attack on women which is not new but continues to evolve. Thus, the poetry can be seen as a form of consciousness raising: the questions raised by the writer reveal larger, pressing societal patterns of subjugation and misogyny.

Wareham Morris' work is inherently queer: the texts interact with queer identity politics and anti-normative frameworks of thinking through the sustained attention paid to fluid, changeable and contradictory subjectivities and experiences (Butler 1990). And, they are inherently "queer" in their manifestation of many poststructuralist "deaths" (Barthes 1970). Through intertextuality, the text is endlessly de- and reconstructed; appearing and disappearing in uncertain and destabilising contexts.

This self-conscious acknowledgment is further problematised by changes in tone and mode of address which represent the trepidation, the hesitation, the fear that bleeds through some of the most personal, most profound moments in the poetry. Moments which at first glance seem to seek "truth", perhaps even "authenticity", only to reveal a text and a writer actively seeking to subvert "fact" and oppose conclusion. There is a scepticism and insecurity embedded in the work which is embraced by the writer; reluctantly perhaps, facetiously maybe, but even so, it becomes their power: this woman cannot speak for all women and there are many more challenges than those presented here.

Here is where we invited Play to play; it did not go our way. Or did it?

Upstage right: enter Play who ironically appears as a middle-class white man, Chair of the Ethics Committee. He skulks onto stage moving towards centre stage; he is dragging a chair and holding a clipboard. There is nothing exciting nor intriguing about Play. There is nothing he wants to say but he must. They sit down on the chair reluctantly. Katy watches from downstage left.

Katy: Do you want to play?

Play: You can't play with me.

Katy: Oh...? I can't reach my full potential if I can't play.

Play: Guess what? You must do this by yourself. You must make this plausible.

Katy: I thought the work of Jenkins in the early 2000s was more than enough to make this “plausible”. I want to participate. I *need* to collaborate.

Play: There is no ensemble cast.

Katy: If I perform, will you listen?

Play: Katy, you simply cannot respond to every response. *I will not respond. I am the Chair of the Ethics Committee.*

Play continues to mutter quietly under his breath: I am the Chair of the Ethics Committee.

Katy: Maybe someone else will hear this.

Play: *I am the Chair of the Ethics Committee. Whose work is this?*

Katy: Thank you for your constructive feedback. For the record, the internet is known to be a collaborative space. Jenkins said this nearly 20 years ago. The field of digital literatures is informed by this established cultural commentary. Have you read the work of Hayles, Ryan, Bell, Ensslin, Skains? There is a history and a legacy.

There is an awkward silence. Play does not engage with Katy at this point. He looks down and flicks through the papers on his clipboard.

Katy continues: I want to say, this is the public domain. I want to call this netnography. I did not predict this. You are my inspiration. Thank you.

Katy bows her head and clasps her hands together in prayer. She keeps facing Play as she moves backwards quickly. She then turns and scurries off stage.

This project is queer by design, execution and process, committed to the interrogation of social and political meanings including those concerned with whose voice is it anyway? Whose work is it anyway? Why can't we collaborate? We challenge that without interactivity and collaboration, it cannot be a form of internet research. It cannot be “digital” practice, let alone *postdigital*. It would miss the opportunities to playfully interact with digital users/ followers/ “friends”, its “audiences”. Thus, we confidently assert that we are bound by terms and conditions of all sorts, all of the time; our consent interpellated into the culture as is. What type of ethical issue is this? Whose work is it anyway? Who cares? The interpolation has occurred before you know it.

Katy: (shouts smugly from offstage) Play, game rules apply.

These texts clearly interrogate the relationships between text(s), creators, digital networks and practices which are participatory and interactive. Indeed, Skains (2023) notes interaction is unavoidable: inherently part of the process and responsible for textual mutations. Netnography is an ethnographic approach to research connected to the internet; a method which recognises that digital spaces are constantly evolving (Kozinets 2020). In this instance, so too the text(s) and its writer(s). Netnography is a flexible approach, hence its appropriate application in the context(s) of Wareham Morris' writing. Netnography validates observing online activities, behaviours and cultures as research. The critical application of this method has afforded the opportunities for Wareham Morris to immerse herself in the technology utilised to create and situate the texts and, to think critically about its playful whilst still literary potential. She pays attention to how technologies are used by writers and the digital contexts used to disseminate and interact with the "writing" these technologies produce. There is considered and sustained attention paid to the reciprocal performing of writers, readers, users, networks, machines which questions not only established writing traditions but also "reading" behaviours and their meaning in the ludic age. This form of enquiry is integral to her practice and raises yet more questions about the potential of "human" forms of expression in these constantly evolving digital contexts. Wareham Morris presents *Viole(n)t Existence* not simply as reconfigurations of womanhood but also as reconfigurations of "writing" and "reading". In turn, these reconfigurations proactively undermine the positions of "writers" and "readers" because they do so much more than write and read; they code, play, collaborate and perform.

However, *Viole(n)t Existence* does not make good on all of its promises. Although notable in the likes and comments on public platforms, these contributions do not necessarily modify the shape of the text because they are not officially recorded nor playfully embedded in the text(s) as some of the other forms of engagement are. They function as "paratexts" (first coined by Genette 1997) as described by Shanmugapriya et al. (2019) in the context of digital literatures: they are another digital literary system within multiple digital literary systems. Although "born digital", *Viole(n)t Existence* is limited only to making sense of the writer's postdigital involvement and performativity. Indeed, audience reactions and interactions during performances may too have been integrated into "new" configurations of the text but they are not evidenced here. Arguably, the potential of unpredictability was leashed to the writer's own hyperlinks and "suggestions".

However, despite missing comment threads, the design of the website is noticeably similar to the web 2.0 hypertexts of the early 2000s, acknowledged by Skains (2023) as a gift economy whereby users are encouraged to produce, co-produce and share content.

In 2003, I was struck by the work of [Juliet Ann Martin](#) and its criticisms and [analysis](#); it has stayed with me. That was my gift. This is mine in return. Naturally, there is a reciprocal labyrinth here and some of its precise details cannot be named, it doesn't mean they don't exist. It just means you can't have a map. And for now, there are no comments. No more comments on this "issue" at least.

Violen)t Existence is not the only "outcome" up for discussion; postdigital ludic practice as a mode of creative criticality acknowledges illusionary, impressionistic, moot conversations. Conversations which question themes, forms, processes; and poetry, research, culture. Conversations which might never happen (*but did despite the limits of this project*). The precise nature of the critical mode is no more tangible, even at this point. To say it is queer is an understatement.

Prescient transparency: do we even need to look?

You don't have to see it to believe it. Everything which precedes this explains why nothing is ever finished, nor certain. This is not a problem. Even if it were, the problems are not hidden. Whose problem is it? Do we worry about this? *Sometimes*. If we're honest, the problem is our power. It is our opportunity to confront the hypocrisy of forms, structures and modes of address not created nor comfortably adopted by us, even when presented as "natural" or "best practice". So too here, where the critical analysis is presented in multiple forms, composed of referents and inherent vulnerabilities or contradictions. It seems ridiculous to seek clear and articulate conclusions where there can be none. We co-exist with the opposite of what it is we're trying to achieve.

"Reading" in this sense is both potentially enlightening and frustrating; reading can be engaging and elusive; reading can be effective and affective. Although playing with the text in this way may create an intimacy between the writer, the text and the reader, it is not always an

easy option as it also reminds the reader of the distance between them: the unimaginable networks connected to all three.

This the problem with literary–ludic texts.

They have their limits.

So do we.

The texts have the potential to evolve, so too our critical engagement. As readers, we are encouraged to develop our processes and approaches in new, not necessarily better directions. We are forced to reframe our critical mindset away from a “problem” to solve, towards an interrogation of a series of provocations.

The stage is black. A spotlight appears which tracks Katy from the back of the stage. She strides forward to downstage centre and taps the mic.

Katy: Do not feel threatened. Ask your own questions. Not the ones you’ve been taught or told to ask. This is not a violent act. Your reputation, your credibility, your 4* rated REF output is not under attack. We will not cross-examine you. We are not the second peer reviewer. You are your own probe, and we welcome any questions at this time.

The house lights go up. The room is full; packed to the rafters. Hands go up and there is noise from the audience.

Postdigital practice is not an all or nothing practice. You can leave here. You have enough to work with. Or, you can [play](#) some more...

Architecting: One of the biggest challenges that postdigital ludic practice as a critical approach responds to is the temptation to play as encouraged by the experimental and dynamic nature of the text it assesses. Systematic, focussed critique of the text is difficult when the text itself surprises us with yet more opportunities to play; we stumble across more text(s), more digital elements, more “suggestions” and pathways and are distracted by new rabbit holes. We must be open to discovery and realise that we will never know the text inside out; we can only know how we play. Our experiences and appraisals of the text are by default an investigation into own subjectivities. Self–reflexivity is not an additional throw-away paragraph at the end of the essay using Gibb’s reflective cycle (1988) in a straightforward and pedestrian way; it is the only system that works. If you need a map, this is the one to use. Guess what? Academics do

not have to write in the third person, pretending they don't exist; apologising for their existence; pretending they are impartial. Your academic voice is your voice.

We understand that in other modes of analysis there is a need to account for the number of nodes or pathways a text can take; the analysis is isolated within the text itself (Formalism, for instance). Indeed, during my Master's research, I was told that my analysis of various hypertexts was incomplete and therefore unsatisfactory because I had not physically accounted for and analysed every digital node or hyperlink. To my mind, this seemed unnecessary. If I'd accounted for every node and link, this would only acknowledge one pathway through them: mine. Unless the pathway is pre-defined, pre-coded then this makes no sense at all. This undermines the engagement with polysemy and of course, play. The Academy wants answers. We say this is not necessary (*and a waste of time!*). Postdigital ludic practice recognises that players play and this is the chance we take.

It is more productive to consider the critical element as an extension of the text(s) it seeks to analyse. Could it be its co-text? Its context? It is not *more* productive; it is as productive. If postdigital ludic criticality is a creative criticality, it represents itself in playful ways: creative responses which also act as critical assessment. And instead of imposing itself upon the text(s) in some kind of hierarchy, which still perceives criticality as "research" and writing as "creativity", it sits alongside the text, as a sibling, another body with its own rabbit holes, its own holes. Therefore, postdigital ludic practice is not only an embodied and cognitive approach to metafiction; it is an embodied, cognitive metafiction which itself must be architected.

I'm sat in the kitchen again.

Rub my eyes, turn my head towards the patio doors.

By chance,

I see
a brown bird in a tree.

Don't know what species of bird.
Don't know what species of tree.

I could be

a bird.

What species? Should I pretend?

Perhaps I metamorphose.

Over time, maybe? After this?

I will have the energy I need to compete. Complete?

I had quantum healing last year. Just before my fortieth Birthday. I am left with the paralysing anxiety excitement of hearing myself say,

Just be happy.

Postdigital ludic practice is a recursive critical investigation which becomes a cold case. That is to say, even if the literary critic wants to be done, the text will continue to fester and needle their mind. This could be good for the literary critic who is looking to produce more REFable outputs. It may mean, however reluctantly, that they become a postdigital ludic practitioner. How to solve this problem? The only problem here is the Academy, who say they are ready, but they are not ready for a radical rethink of the modes and methods of critical engagement and its presentation. If this critical engagement is fragmented, impressionistic, illusionary too. A symbolic destruction. One or two (digital?) lyric essays – fine. A move towards creative critical hybridity as a “standard”...

Just be happy.

We are not suggesting that this is not an “academic essay” nor that this is not critical writing. We are saying it looks and acts differently. Its aims and trajectories are not to destroy the “Essay”, but to work with it. This helps others join the game.

Let’s have a conversation. There is a lot of “me time” in the PhD: isolation, anxiety, trash-talk. There is a lot *me* in this PhD: empathy, thinking, too much empathy, too much thinking, people pleaser, toxic inner critic, drama. I came into this to talk about what I Love. To express my thoughts, my feelings and experiences. I thought I would be able to tell my story through someone else’s lens. I thought this meant writing poetry and essays. What a privilege. What an honour. So why am “I” a big no-no? I got here and you’re all the same as out there. I adopt “we” because, you know, safety in numbers.

Prospecting: Engaging in postdigital ludic practice has involved mining the following critical networks:

Digital literatures specifically digital poetry

Digital theories and methodologies

Gaming and play theories

Web design and coding

Hybrid literary forms and genres – the avant garde, surrealism, speculative fiction, personal essay, creative non-fiction, performance, memoir, prose poetry, flash fiction, concrete poetry

Poststructuralism – death, intertextuality, assemblage

Postmodernism – metanarratives, nonlinear structure, polysemy

Psychoanalysis – desires, dreams, the uncanny, symbolic order

Ecocriticism – radical landscapes, Anthropocene, New Nature writing

Artivisms

Feminisms – DIY, intersectional, standpoint, new material, digital

Queer theories and methodologies

Postqueer becomings

Affect theories

Posthumanism

(I hope I know this stuff)

Can you see this?

This list reminds us of the precedent in Literature to utilise practical tools as creative ones, helping us to reframe what it is we think we know about “Literature” (Jameson 2010). *(This is how we knew we weren’t mad.)* We have borrowed from these frameworks to interrogate the transformative potentials of postdigital ludic practice and in this case, the text it created, that is *Viole(n)t Existence*. We have presented “findings”, but these are transformed through the practice that creates them. Postdigital ludic practice is a creativecritical tool: the creative is critical and the critical is creative and we call this meta. Hence, we continue to refine the tools because the meaning is in the play, the (re)creation. Anyway, technology continues to grow and develop and so we know our capacities (our arms, our legs, our brains, our hearts) must also (continue to?) mutate.

If I had a hypothesis, it has been tested and it is valid. *Plausibility! Shall we just leave now?*

Foraging: Don’t tell me,

You've got this.

You don't know what you've got,
till
it's ~~gone~~.

Don't tell me,
You've made it.

There is always something else
worth striving for.
Who knows
if
it will be
(trans)formative.

How does someone
be happy?

The plan was outlined above; the plan has been achieved. Yet nothing is ever finished so "achievements" mean nothing. If it is a "surprise!", we think of energy, enthusiasm, excitement, fun, dopamine, memories, butterflies and you can't sleep at night. If it is a "*surprise*", we think of fear, anxiety, the unknown, numbness, paralysis, butterflies and you can't sleep at night.

Is this happiness?

So, we move
on

The postdigital ludic practitioner should also turn to frameworks of knowledge which do not sit comfortably within the established canon of Literary Criticism because they do not simply seek answers where they are known and likely. They should seek answers in unfamiliar territories. This is the Posthuman approach to the New Humanities (Braidotti 2019).

Everything in the universe including our bodies is made of energy. Through mindfulness and hypnotherapy, we can rebalance energy flow and facilitate physical and emotional healing. My therapist told me that the brain is directly connected to the gut and, the gut has its own

nervous system. Therapy taught me more about the science behind my disease than the doctors did. I now know about the vagus nerve. The brain in my gut.

Breathe, Katy. Connect with nature. Be quiet.

As has been noted, the text(s) explore manifestations of Wareham Morris' contradictory and pluralistic identities. There is also an ambiguity linked to time and space, not simply in the context of presentation of the poems, that being the page or online, but in the sense of what times and spaces the author's identities exist in. The text represents a compilation of existences from the poet's past, present and imagined future; at times these "existences" are also seemingly implausible, perhaps entirely fictional. This is where the ambiguity over time and space in relation to context of presentation becomes all the more interesting: the versions of the self co-exist indiscriminately, just as the printed book and website. This playfully complicates the narrative discourse or "natural" procession of the selves represented. There is no linear thread or "right way" of reading the text(s) directing the reader to trace acts of development (aging and maturity, knowledge transfer, trauma response, cause and effect) which might be utilised to situate the reader within the poet's narrative timeline and therefore make sense of the poet's experiences. The poet cannot make sense of these experiences and be "done", onto the next poem, so there is no sense in presenting them in a linear way. The transparent multiplicity of the text(s) and its (contradictory) manifestations further enhances the provocations and tensions which the author explores about their existence. Even if these experiences are dialectical, there is no timeline because they are not "done". Thus, even the concept of "existence", its material as well as cognitive manifestations, are questioned and undermined.

This existence is an assemblage of

b o d i e s

no more no less

equally confusing
contradictory

~~transient~~

They exist within an assemblage of

b o d i e s

no more no less

equally confusing,
contradictory

~~transient~~

In addition, Wareham Morris often experiments with space on the page, ensuring that the shapes and forms created by the white space interact with the space taken up by text or image itself; where the presentation of the poems is just as surprising perhaps as the version of the self in question. In this sense the typography not only creates white space on the page but may also be seen to represent the potential for unspoken, unknown selves to emerge. The movement of the words on the page creates a sense of energy or potential, similarly to the energy created in the spoken word performances where the author moves into different spaces.

This is frustrating and tiresome, but it is necessary if there is to be any (trans)formative exchange of meaning at all. Your physical frustration is the mirror and I am the lens.

The critical work cannot be “done”, it sits within the critic’s mind, remember? Even when they perceive themselves to have stopped searching for answers, they continue – continuous present. Once they start, they will always be part of the bodies that move.

This means when I’m under and the therapist is asking me,
What do you see, Katy? Where are you?
I tell them:

I’m sat in the kitchen again.

Rub my eyes, turn my head towards the patio doors.

By chance,

I see
a brown bird in a tree.

Don’t know what species of bird.
Don’t know what species of tree.

I could be
a bird.

What species? Should I pretend?
Perhaps I metamorphose.
I say,

Just be happy.

Is this working?
After this

I will still have *this* to finish and, I will still have Crohn's Disease and I will still hate motherhood and marriage.

Maybe I can get a poem or two out of this?

Fossicking: Although it might not seem necessary for a literary critic to collect research fragments, we say the point has been made about seeking frameworks of knowledge or critical approaches which are not natural bedfellows for the fields of digital literatures, literary analysis nor the Humanities. These may present themselves to the literary critic at surprising times, in surprising spaces, inside or outside of the text(s) but are certainly not limited to "Academia". These become fragments which may help to shape and develop future critical analysis, especially if this can never be "done".

The postdigital ludic practitioner is not motivated to tick boxes:

- English Literature
- Literary Theory
- Creative Writing
- Digital Literatures
- Ludology

in order to meet a "standard" or follow "tradition". They are guided by intuition and

Synaesthetic synchronicity with machines: It is not enough to simply cut up an "essay" and disseminate it on the network. Nor recognise how and when a writer appears "in sync" with technology. A postdigital ludic practitioner must assess the implications of these actions. For writing, for reading, for becoming

This is a body of work which explores the potential of the cyborg (Haraway 1985). The modes of practice and methods of dissemination make a demonstrable case for a discernible and

valuable connection with networked machines; the machine functions to scaffold a landscape or digital context for the text(s) to sit in, hyperlinked to their other iterations. Thus, it provides an anchor point for these connections, a visible body of its own.

Once connected, bodies grow

Wareham Morris makes the point that these technologies do not merely exist, but her existence is digital, relying on technology and its manifestations for the meanings and practices of everyday life. *(Not just in the home as a mother who sets timers thorough the Home Hub and asks Google to answer her children's questions. Not simply as a working woman who is answerable to emails when juggling and is easily distracted by social media.)* Wareham Morris pays attention to the realities of her existence afforded by and involving machines; there is no “existence” without technologies, literally and metaphorically. These texts cannot exist without technology, neither can she thus her creative practice must also be inherently digital. This is a central theme: the digital cultures which emerge in contemporary society are nebulous, but a contemporary existence, and thus expressions of this existence, rely on these cultures nevertheless. Most importantly is the prescient transparency with which these technologies are used. This is precisely why the text(s) can be read as postdigital: attestations of (post?)humanity in the use of digital technologies (Alexenberg 2011).

However, this connection to machines is a little clumsy at times, perhaps a little too obvious; a seamless decentralised network of rhizomatic connections between writer(s), readers and machines has not been achieved. Yet this essay argues that this can be interpreted as an intentional and self-conscious creative decision alluding to the as yet unknowable potential of the machine connection: this is not as far as Wareham Morris could go, and she knows it.

How far will I go?

These repeated acts of self-conscious questioning are significant, reminding readers that their reading experience cannot finish, because the creative process itself is ongoing. Wareham Morris may continue to experiment with new technologies as her knowledge and skills develop adding new hyperlinks, images, soundscapes of videos to the text; and, she cannot predict how the text(s) may mutate whilst living in the digital network.

Katy: Hey Google, you couldn't answer this one, could you? Although we fear that may be one day, you will. Did you finish that poem I asked you to write?

Google does not reply.

Katy: Hey Google, turn on the bedroom lights.

Haptic consciousness: The true potential of postdigital ludic practice lies in our ability to present our “findings” as a postdigital commonplace book. You can see this [here](#).

Asynchronous Dispersion and Dissemination: Academics must present their findings; this is what they do. Postdigital ludic practitioners present and disseminate their findings in playful ways, only to challenge the meaning of the word, “findings”.

The postdigital ludic practitioner experiments with form and adopts a purposefully creative criticality to the presentation of their findings, which might include podcasts, diagrams, memes and videos. Versions of their findings may be published in various different spaces, times and contexts. This is another creativecritical experiment.

The findings from this project and [here](#) and [there](#).

This is a good thing for the “academic” who is trying to break barriers and engage non-academic audiences. Especially this one, who is

- female
- working class
- disabled

We say postdigital ludic practice is an academic mode for those whose voices still struggle to be heard in the Academy and elsewhere.

Acquiescing to the networks: Instead of counting every node and plotting the journey, postdigital ludic practice invites other scholars to play. As the writing is a collaborative task, so too is the mode of criticality. Instead of the loneliness, isolation and pressure of the solo academic, work together. Once the postdigital ludic practitioner has accounted for their

movement through the text(s), invite another to add the critical assessment of their movements. Each journeys through the text in their own way, their own time, their own space; their assessment unique to these play moves. Once the solo “academic” relinquishes control of the analysis, the argument, they are empowered and create space for others to be empowered too. It is good to have alternative viewpoints as this respects the freedom of the text(s) and its collaborators.

To conclude, *Violen(t) Existence* is, if nothing else, a collection of stories about womanhood. It criticises patriarchal stereotypes and identifies sexist hypocrisies which still exist for women today. Moreover, through the modes of its production and dissemination it challenges the stable structures, the patriarchal constructs that are bound within the definitions of “writing”, “poetry” and “publication”. Wareham Morris draws attention to her lived experiences as a woman through the central themes within the writing, but also through the self-conscious and self-reflexive attention paid to the practice throughout the text(s): the use of strikethrough, repetition, iterations of the ‘same’ text. This forces the reader to acknowledge the presence of the writer and her incomplete, uncertain feminist postdigital practice. *Feminist* because this practice undermines the traditional view that the writer’s text is at some point “finished” and if deemed worthy, will be published by authorities within a patriarchal Canon. *Postdigital* because the writer here constructs her own network of traditional and non-traditional “publications”; an unpredictable chaos of sorts which perhaps better reflects her position(s) within a still predominantly white, middle class, male writing and publishing world as well as the social world she exists within. If *Violen(t) Existence* is about a woman’s knowledge then that knowledge is also evidenced through the very existence of the text itself; an existence which does not wait to be acknowledged and appraised by patriarchal writing publishing norms and standards, but openly and bravely acquiesces to the unknown trajectories of the digital network, seeking readers, users, collaborators and critics. Thus, the work adopts a feminist standpoint and can be read as a demonstration of the critical approach as outlined by the work of Harding (1986) Smith (1992).

This approach strengthens reciprocal bonds between postdigital ludic practitioners: there are no insecure imposters here. (*Only sometimes*) Just as this type of capitulation can develop trust and intimacy through collaborative writing practices, so too trust and intimacy can develop through collaborative criticality. (*More bodies!*) We do not have to think about whose

name goes first on this research output. Just as postdigital ludic writing practice does not wait for “traditional” publication, this criticality will not wait to be acknowledged by means of a double-blind peer-reviewed journal article authored by an “academic”. This type of critical appraisal can be created and published by anyone within the (digital) network, be that scholar, academic, critic or otherwise. Thus no one assessment or knowledge of the text is more worthy; this is not a conventional wisdom.

We take this opportunity to remind you that postdigital ludic practice does not seek to erase traditional modes and standards of academia but to work alongside them. Therefore, if you’d like to include this critical approach in your research plan, then we say the ~~academics-players~~ bodies you seek are

practitioners

first generation/
working class/
disabled/
of the global majority/
queer/
working part-time/
negotiating weaponised incompetence/

coordinating homework, school lunches, societies, hobbies, afterschool clubs, breakfast clubs, any clubs, parents’ evenings, uniforms, birthday parties, play dates, school holiday childcare, any type of childcare and are crippled by guilt, of all sorts, all the time/

daughters whose ageing parents supported them in everything they do but who no longer recognise their “little girl”/

Scholars

who don’t have the right qualifications, experiences or CVs to call themselves Scholars at all

We say postdigital ludic practice creates a body of feminist knowledges, of feminist standpoints. No hegemonic, academic truths or findings here. Simply, analytical, potentially contradictory, perpetually metamorphosing rhizomes of knowledge which link their body to the other bodies playing the game.

Referential Paralleling: postdigital ludic practice creates bodies of work which are connected through various networks, yet this makes them difficult to discern. That is because they may not reveal themselves in a style or form that other scholars are used to; they may not appear recognisably “academic”, but they may share similarities. They may not. This type of analysis is not just for “Scholars” and so the language and presentation of the critical engagement is not only playful but adopts its own creative as well as critical standpoint. The decentralised rhizomatic connections between these critical bodies, dispersed amongst and alongside the texts’ creative postdigital bodies creates an intimacy between

creativecriticalpractice
writerreaderscholarsmachines
digitalpractitionersdigitalusers
bookwebpage

This is the only making sense there can be

What is most slippery about postdigital ludic “practice” is that it changes; it changes with experience. It is only ever a starting point for...

Assemblage of networked fragments /

omnificent bodies

I’m sat in the kitchen again.

Rub my eyes, turn my head towards the patio doors.

By chance,

I see

a brown bird in a tree.

*This bird is a female House Sparrow and
she is small with
brownny-black markings,
a pale chest and
a simple head.
She sings a common song but
it is loud
and repeated over and over and over and over*

This tree is a Crab Apple and

*it is small with
furry pinky-green fruits,
they too are small sitting
amongst the spines of dragons.
They make sweet jelly and
great partners
reeking of
love
marriage
children*

I could be

a bird.

*"Follow me", She calls
as she*

darts

to the hedgerow and

back

to the fascia

and

to the eave

*where she
(hides)*

c

a

/

/

s

Should I pretend?

It is worth remembering that providing a functional register for postdigital ludic practice has a dual purpose: a critical framework for scholars analysing literary–ludic texts; and a contribution to the discourse on theoretical modes of literary–ludic analysis. It is a creativecritical hybrid practice.

Posthuman Transformations: Postdigital Ludic Practice as *Jouissance*

I come

as the writerly comes
purely to create through my break
with your positions
and
codes

101010101010101010
101010101010101010
101010101010101010
101010101010101010
101010101010101010

And although I don't like to use the word *important*,
the writerly was from the start and
I have been living with these thoughts for over 20 years now.
And I am learning that it is not my composition that is sliding around
but it is my composition and I am
constantly (re)establishing who
I want to be and
that is hard
when you don't change and
you just want to stay inside.

10this10
1010isyou1010
101010trapped101010
10101010herethinking10101010
1010101010thisis1010101010
10101010allthat10101010
101010youhave101010
1010todo1010
10tobe10

Everything about this life is an effort
I try to stay o p e n
Can you see my point of view?
Does it matter?
You could write to me and
that would be

10
1010
10nothing10
1010likethis10
10101010101010
101010101010
101010101010
101010101010

I have been mis-judged so many times

and now.
Do you realise you are like that?
You could be so much more but
you have to want it.
Do you want it?
I'm not sure what I want.

I fear that you will make the same mistakes but
we all make mistakes.
You should know by now that I can't and
I won't.
20 years of hell says,
I'm done.

But even whilst saying that,
you and I both know
this is a pain I cannot escape:
you
continue to resist me,
and so,
we are
both in pain.
This means
I will rip you apart
and you might not like it but

I looked up and the sky was white
marbling like paint in water
and I could hear all types of birds.

*I thought I had found you but
you left me and
now I have to do this all
alone.*

*Do you understand how hard that is?
They still don't understand me. I look at your photo and ask,
What would you think of this?
Give me a sign that you like it, please.*

Brown bird
Brown bird
Brown bird

Just be happy.

To let you in
is to let

you
suffer

1010come in1010
1010 1010
1010 1010
101010 101010

You will have to accept me,
but I must accept myself first.

How is it that what you love is wrapped up in so much pain? You cannot rip the plaster off and be done. The plaster grows again and you must rip again and it grows again and you must rip again. I thought this would allow me to do what I love but, even after therapy of different kinds, I still don't know how to love ~~without pain~~. This is so much harder than I thought it would be. And my pain makes it harder and that is something I live with.

This is the destructive power of my creation.

There is nothing new here. I've read the books. Couldn't pronounce the words.
But
you can't
make promises and
then just walk away.

Actually, I don't need your help. I will take this ~~knowledge~~
You will

1010come in1010
1010 1010
1010 1010
101010 101010

it feels good.
Don't struggle.
Let's try a new position.

I am too wrapped up
enraptured
just knowing they are there and
I am ~~no longer~~ alone

If you want to play, you have to touch,
and the body is not the body you

~~think you know.~~

You can touch us

here

there

here again

But we won't reveal any truths and
we won't pretend.

I spent too long pretending and
now I know
these bodies are the ones that can

I don't follow
I listen and
I feel

We persist for –
never trying to find the answer nor the definition nor the central argument nor the
recognition nor the promotion nor the gratitude nor the status nor the truth

Truth is

It will never be what you want it to be,
It will never fit your standard.
Needless-to-say,
you
were never the right fit,
my love was

10
1010
10nothing10
1010likethis10
10101010101010
101010101010
101010101010
101010101010

Your codes are meaningless here and I hope you realise that. It is a pain to have to use the
system you created to oppose the system you created and to try and make sense when there
is no sense to make and this is what matters the most to you

I am beyond
yet we know nothing.
Funny, isn't it?

Perhaps you're too confused to find this funny and perhaps you are so confused that you're questioning everything and perhaps you cannot get these questions out of your head and perhaps you cannot sleep at night because these questions cannot be answered by you or by anyone and perhaps everything you thought you knew about the answers/ definitions/ central argument/ recognition/ promotion/ gratitude/ status / truth and the world/ yourself is now called into question and perhaps now you're beginning to understand our pain

Do you feel like you're dying yet?
I have died so many times

*One of you did die,
one of the good ones,
a part of the system,
but we liked him.
We realise now that he too may have been pretending and
it is another source of pain.
This is just something else to think about.*

Brown bird
Brown bird
Brown bird

Just be happy.

It is worth remembering that we still want to play with you and that we enjoy it – sometimes – and we realise that nothing makes sense without a system so we have to use the system and then

we will enter and
rip it apart

Little by little we become aware of the bodies who want to join us,
they do so freely,
we recruit without knowing and that means we grow and that means
we can

We are o p e n
and we will not accept your reality
our challenge will be to use what you have given us, what you have to offer and although I say
I want you to do things differently, the reason I am here is to ask for you to accept me.

Don't be scared of me, I am just another commodity/ dream/ truth/ authority hiding within
and if I'm honest, you did not steal anything in the first place. But do not ignore me.

It may still satisfy me to work with your codes and standards but if I want to be free and we
all want to be free I must

101010101010101010
 101010101010101010
 101010101010101010
 101010101010101010
 101010101010101010

and then

	10	10
	1010	1010
	101010	101010
	10101010	10101010
1010101010		1010101010
10101010		10101010
101010		101010
1010		1010
10		10

The temptation is to fill me up, but you should just play feel

m
 o
 v
 e

I don't know any other language so you will have to
 help me
 and I know that will be
 hard for you
 but not as
 hard
 as it is for me having to admit it
 especially now,
 after everything we've been through.

We grow and
 you will feel our power

I will rip you apart.

Do not be afraid,
all of this is a lie,
none of it ever happened.
Do you understand?

Postdigital Ludic practice: Outcomes of Play

This previous chapter concluded that there can be no conclusion: the tools and methods are not exhaustive nor exclusive; they are only just beginning

The central finding presented in this chapter is that we cannot know if there are any “findings”, conclusions, truths. Refining the tools as a critical framework has, however, demonstrated the potential for this practice to catalyse posthuman transformations: play outcomes that are both posthuman and transformative because they cannot be precisely known nor perceived yet respond to the mutability of the posthuman condition. Hence the tools are not meant to be a recipe, prescription, nor direction but a mere acknowledgment that literary–ludic texts are playful by design and thus demand playful writerly engagement. Literary–ludic texts are not simply “playful” but necessitate playful modes of creation and interpretation. These behaviours and activities are articulated as the creativecritical hybrid features and characteristics of postdigital ludic practice.

And you can take them or leave them.

Earlier in this research, the established scholarship within the fields of ludology and digital literatures, in relation to the critical analysis of literary–ludic texts, on the associated effects and outcomes of playful behaviours was acknowledged; most pertinently the consideration that these effects were still up for debate. This thesis has examined the potential play outcomes of postdigital ludic practice as a set of tools and methods for creative digital writing and, as a critical framework for the analysis of literary–ludic texts. It is important to note postdigital ludic practice is positioned as a toolkit for play, rather than a “theory”, to acknowledge and support the very specific creative and analytic challenges associated with literary–ludic texts; notably that they are fundamentally and unavoidably in flux.

Central to the investigation of and experimentation with these behaviours and activities to assess their potential is the posthuman position of destroying to create open possibilities (Wolfe 2009). As activism, postdigital ludic practice utilises hegemonic structures and discursive modes of power in order to contaminate and transform them. Therefore, it disrupts the status quo, for writing, creative digital practice and modes of literary–ludic analysis and, in doing so it creates autopoietic systems of networked bodies that interact, continuously regenerate, and recognise the processes that have produced them. This thesis argues that the posthuman potential of play of this kind, in this context catalyses posthuman, affective becomings which may (or may not) be considered *jouissance*.

Postdigital ludic practice conceives multiplicitous assemblages of metamorphosing networked bodies which play; that is the actualisation of postqueer “intensive politics of becoming” (Ruffolo 2016: 20). The focus being not what or who these bodies are, but what they do. Crucially these bodies oppose power because they do not seek to be identified or defined specifically nor precisely; they simply explore their creativecritical desires for their own playful sake and, in doing so catalyse yet more new “becomings”. To adopt a familiar framework, the work of Žižek (cited in Butler 1993) is useful here as there are similarities in his discussion of queer subjects who are paradoxically comprised of both symbolic discourse (such as language) and resignifying practice, which in this case is play: the phantasmatic performativity of reverse–discourse that resists Symbolisation. The central departure being the shift from Žižek’s subjects–as–beings to dialogical becomings, which as noted is inherently posthuman and postqueer.

This thesis asserts that postdigital ludic practice, as a creativecritical hybrid toolkit, is a valuable posthuman transformation in itself. Although radically unstable, the tools and methods acknowledged at least for now have the potential to:

- catalyse an assemblage of constantly metamorphosing bodies which invade, rupture and destroy in order to (re)create; and,

- create creativecritical hybrid spaces, worlds within a world of (sometimes creative, sometimes critical, sometimes both) nodes, pathways and networks which are mutually exclusive but also meet again; therefore,
- these spaces are mutually informing and inherently rhizomatic;
- simultaneously disturbing, intense, contradictory and unknown.

If nothing else, this is *jouissance*.

Do not be afraid,
all of this is a lie,
none of it ever happened.
Do you understand?

Conclusion

Overview

This research contributes to the field of digital literatures by investigating the writing and reading practices of writers and users when engaged in a “triological relationship” (Weight 2006: 413-414) where computers act as intermediaries between them and texts therefore challenging traditional definitions of “writers” and “readers” and their associated practices and behaviours. Utilising self-directed ethnomethodology to facilitate practice-led research I have explored the potentialities of this relationship and recorded the results. Personal reflections as well as established critical insights within the field of digital literatures informed the processes of reviewing and reflecting on my own creative practice, including knowledge and understanding of the specific features of digital literatures such as the construction and purposeful integration of chains of meaning and relational codes (Hayles 1999: 31), and the blurring of time and space whilst working alongside traditional literary features to construct a “literary game” (Ensslin 2014).

One of the central aims of this research was to develop a better understanding and appreciation of my own writing practices, not only to extend the discussions already taking place within digital literatures (Skains 2016, 2019), but to inform the artistic practices of other writers by offering an operational creative-critical hybrid toolkit for digital writing specifically. The research has achieved this aim and offers the following significant and original contribution to knowledge: a functional register for *postdigital ludic practice* which usefully develops theoretical perspectives on digital writing, such as those connected with postdigital forms of expression and ludic behaviours; and, specifically applies and integrates these as modes of writing practice for digital writers. In the Literature Review chapter, this research acknowledges the already established research in the field of digital literatures whilst recognising much of this focusses specifically on hermeneutics. The discussions of specific digital writing tools and methods were often limited to specific programmes or applications (such as the work of Barnard 2015, 2017, 2019). The toolkit acknowledges and validates the unique opportunities and challenges, including the perpetually changing digital landscape,

afforded to digital writers. This is exactly why the toolkit is considered “emerging”, open to change, further development and refinement, whilst recognising that digital texts seemingly never end, therefore nor can the writing. This is explored explicitly in chapter three, Experiments in Multimodal Creative Writing: Establishing the Tools and Methods of Postdigital Ludic Practice and, chapter four the lyric essay, Experiments in Creative Criticality: Establishing the Posthuman Potentialities of Postdigital Ludic Practice

Postdigital Ludic Practice: The Significance of Play

When developing an operational register for digital writing there was sustained engagement with ludology and its significant contributions within the field of digital literatures, Much of the existing research had focussed on the “literary-ludic” (Ensslin 2014) structures of digital texts, whilst discourses about playful modes of writing were limited not only in this field, but within the field of Creative Writing more generally. This research sought to develop the games studies argument for the formative effects of play (Sartre 1995) exploring its potential to open new analytical processes and dimensions especially when considered in digital contexts (Dippel and Fizek 2016). Through the development of postdigital ludic practice this research considered and interrogated the intentions, contradictions, manifestations and meanings of play, beyond the arguably obtuse and confusing definitions and categorisations offered by previous scholars including Caillois (2001, first published in 1961).

It was important to recognise that play forms not only apply to digital texts and the playful engagement of their users, but to digital writers who utilise play to progress their writing and to experiment with their identities when engaged in the triological relationship (Weight 2006), but also without specific purpose, intention or aim. If our behaviour is fundamentally playful (Tomasello 1999) so too is (digital) writing practice. Yet postdigital ludic practice doesn’t necessarily seek to become a “work”, a product of labour, even if playful, which has capital value. Ludic writing operates alongside, within, sometimes against writing labour; and, it is also inherently postdigital as writers assert their lived experiences of a chaotic posthuman context (Braidotti 2019) through their various modes of practice (Alexenberg 2011). This is important for understanding the manifestations of the ludification of digital culture which in

and of itself encourages new play forms (Raessens 2006, 2010, 2014) whilst interacting with language, narratives and behaviours.

Understanding the “posthuman condition” (Braidotti 2016) has been integral for understanding the transformative potential of play as this “condition”, perhaps more so than ever before, demonstrates that play blurs the boundaries between humans, non-humans and culture (Huizinga 1992, first published in 1938). The tools and methods of postdigital ludic practice recognises that the triological relationship (Weight 2006) demands that the quantities and scale of play increase whilst amplifying the interconnectedness of humans and non-humans. This research has demonstrated the functions of postdigital ludic “practice” where writing, digital work and play overlap and pervade each other; thus, it is a playful “interference” (Dippel and Fizek 2015, 2016) challenging dualistic models whilst integrating the discursive complexities and multidimensionality of our culture. This is its transformative dimension.

Practice-Led Outcomes: The Significance of *Viole(n)t Existence*

Postdigital ludic practice was “tested” and refined as part of this research. The product of these experiments is *Viole(n)t Existence* which undoubtedly demonstrates how postdigital ludic practice can be successfully and purposefully utilised to create original multimodal poetry. It also demonstrates how postdigital ludic practice functions alongside existing frameworks of writing such as “pen and paper” and “editing” and traditional book publishing such as the page poems of *Violet Existence* (published by Broken Sleep Books in 2022 which are described by Aaron Kent, editor, as “wild and dynamic” and “high voltage, daring[...]). Despite my limited digital skills, I was able to film and edit poetry films of various kinds and utilise YouTube and Twitter (now X), then hyperlink these components to architect a functional website. The content on the website can be recognisably identified as original hypermedia poetry.

Evidentially *Viole(n)t Existence* is an accomplished and sophisticated creative artefact. Every hyperlink within the website has been hand-coded by me. The various multimodal elements

of *Violen)t Existence* help to construct an immersive experience. These elements are not only original but technically accomplished; they are significant textual elements of *Violen)t Existence* and are integral to the ludic ecosystems operating within the text. The website adopts stylistic similarities and features of the hypertexts which initially captured my imagination and interest in the field of digital literatures in the early 2000s, notably the work of Juliet Ann Martin (such as *ooxxxxooo* from 1997). Not only does her work share thematic similarities in that her hypertext poetry explores female bodies and pluralistic female experiences, identities and sexualities, but my work pays homage to her use of concrete poetry, hidden hyperlinks and subtle changes in colour when navigating these links.

Prior to this project I had no previous experience or skill in web design or coding. It took me over a year to learn how to effectively and creatively engage with WordPress and its plugins. I embraced my limited skills and sought to reframe my own perceptions of these through the process of critical reflection as recorded in my research journals. For example, challenges such as lack of financial resource to pay a digital creator to build the website and, rapid technological developments (I.E. artificial intelligence) were purposefully recorded and reflected on. This process not only helped to refine the tools and methods of postdigital ludic practice but meant I was able to perceive my skills and aims in new ways. Rather than simply recognising this experience as Barnard (2019) does as remediations in practice, these processes helped to develop a fundamental tool for postdigital ludic practice, that is *prescient transparency*. I learnt not to avoid the specific challenges of or barriers to digital creativity, but to embrace these openly and honestly, using them as motivational factors to drive my writing practice forward and therefore integrating these “shortfalls” as components of the creative work.

The application of *prescient transparency* affords digital writers opportunities to renegotiate established definitions and modes of writing, as well as the status of “writers” and their masterpiece. Digital writers may never be satisfied with their creative works because they may not (perhaps never) have the skills, money, and / or time to keep up with the ever-changing technological landscape. Moreover, digital texts can never be “finished”, published sacred Literary entities because the work exists within computational networks which demand various forms of mutability (for example, unpredictable networked internet pathways,

conditions and context of user access and remixing and sharing of users). Postdigital ludic practice acknowledges that writers and users change their perspective as a result of play; changes which were unfathomable before writing and reading and, in some cases, continue to be unintelligible.

Violen(t) Existence operates as a dynamic archive of creative multimodal materials comprised of multiple rhizomatic structures and these structures do not “close” nor “finish” just because this project has come to an end. Although the research project has fulfilled its aims and is complete, I will intentionally hyperlink future projects to *Violen(t) Existence* as a commitment to prescient transparency whilst extending the ludic and cognitive opportunities and experiences for my future “readers”. This exemplifies my position that postdigital ludic practices and its outcomes exist as assemblage, inextricably linked to processes of becoming (Braidotti 2019).

The lyric essay as another iteration of *Violen(t) Existence* and is an example of exactly how postdigital ludic practice operates as both process and product. Operationalised in chapter four as a creative-critical toolkit, postdigital ludic practice functions alongside literary close reading and acknowledged and accepted critical approaches within the Literary Humanities whilst presenting this analysis in highly original stylistic ways. The lyric essay as another functioning multimodal component of *Violen(t) Existence*, moves beyond the traditions of the exegesis and therefore the traditions of the Literary Humanities which focus on and interpret cultural representations. It illustrates *reciprocal performing* by drawing attention to the other subjectivities and roles I perform, including “researcher” and “academic” which do not exist in isolation to the subjectivities the other digital components of *Violen(t) Existence* explore, such as “mother”, “wife”, “daughter” and so on.

I was committed to investigating the nuances of my multiple subjectivities and therefore my socially ascribed and achieved roles cannot be pulled apart and isolated as systemic patriarchy and its research models would have us believe. One of the central concerns of this research is the embodied and embedded material affects of the processes of becoming; and through the rhizomatic, multilinear narrative structures of *Violen(t) Existence* this research has drawn attention to my multiple posthuman subjectivities. As a working class, disabled, female

academic I have utilised postdigital ludic practice as a hybrid creative-critical toolkit to demonstrate my playful understanding of these subjectivities, whilst seeking to articulate the embodied and embedded, affective experiences of the posthuman.

The lyric essay is successful in demonstrating the democratising potential of postdigital ludic practice as when utilised as an analytical tool it produces “research” comparable to that of more familiar models often associated with the knowledge economies of Major Research (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). The diverse research outcomes it produces can be interpreted as rich “data” with real time relevance, representing intersectional voices and thus countering male bias within academia (Kulkov et al. 2024; Llorens et al. 2021). This research catalyses the potential of postdigital ludic practice to not simply create and interpret digital texts within a posthuman context, but to provide multiple accounts of the circumstances and experiences that structure contemporary beliefs and therefore give meaning to these experiences. Initially I intended to consider digital writing as forms of metafiction, yet on closer reflection it appears that postdigital ludic practice operates as metanarrative.

Violen)t Existence demonstrates the potential for my experiences, emotions, memories and traumas to not simply be “heard” or recognised by “readers” as with page poetry, but its multimodal iterations enable the transfer of those complexities and challenges to users who are able to sense this through the affects of play. For example, my poetry films not only utilise changes in tone and pace and pauses to disrupt a user’s perception, but the constant dis- and re-orientation of users when (re)locating the same poem in different formats forces them to not only perceive my delight, confusion, frustration, anger but to feel it for themselves. The recursive and fragmented, episodic nature of *Violen)t Existence* is particularly successful at reflecting my prolonged state of trauma (childbirth, Crohn’s Disease) and, the paradoxes of womanhood today: effective, present mothering; micromanaging feminist ally husbands; imposter syndrome-infected careers... The digital poems refuse to present a cohesive narrative with a distinct temporality and therefore the belief that these experiences can be remedied or cured. Postdigital ludic practice reworks trauma, fear, anger and other negative affects into productive, transformative energies.

The multimodal (re)configurations of these poems extend the potential for playful engagement with the plural, alternative, contradictory meanings of their printed “twins”. *Violen(t) Existence* attempts to represent the multiplicity of my female experiences and identities and by connecting these experiences to unknowable networked communities the polyvocal potential of the poems is harnessed. Beyond the thematic foci of *Violen(t) Existence*, it typifies the potential of postdigital ludic practice to perform as a form of activist posthuman knowledge production, not only with its potential to manifest the complexities of ongoing processes of subject formation, but with its power to move within and amongst different “non-places” (Augé 2009) and different plains of thinking, of knowing and therefore power. Regardless of background or status, and as long as they have internet access of some sort, users can engage with various elements of *Violen(t) Existence* and are extended opportunities to collaborate, to play together through the participatory functions of the internet (Jenkins 2008).

As explained in chapter three, the affective “viral counterpublics” (Somers-Willems 2014) that manifest because of digital systems and spaces are integral to the potential of postdigital ludic practice and its outcomes. The poems within *Violen(t) Existence* move with and amongst various analogue and computational networks, evidencing *vigorous movement* and thus the open possibilities for digital writing to move beyond motivations to publish in a traditional sense, and instead make affective connections with other digital users who do not perceive themselves as “writers” or “poets”. In conversations with each other, in different forms, time and space, the various ecosystems (literary and otherwise) exemplify not only the “ludic mechanics” (Ensslin 2014) of digital texts but the flexible and multiple layers of “flickering signifiers” (Hayles 1999: 31) that digital writers engineer, whilst not always seeking nor perceiving to, nevertheless creating “affective bonds” (Karppi 2018) with users.

This demands a reconsideration of the serious agents of writing and publishing, and evidences postdigital ludic practice as engaged in multiple relational ecologies of becoming. These affective contexts are embodied and embedded, rooted in the material realities of the posthuman condition and have the power to resist the commercialisation associated with traditional publishing, “literary scenes” and social media behaviours. Processes of becoming coalesce as assemblages of democratising “we” (Todd 2016; Braidotti 2019; Wu 2019),

engaging those missing or overlooked by Literature and the Academy. This assemblage does not seek to create yet another binary but moves amongst different social imaginaries to bring others in.

Whilst postdigital ludic practice accounts for the importance of *reciprocal performing* some potential collaborations, such as online re-posting and re-mixing of posts from other social media users, were not included in this project due to the conditions of the ethical approval. These interactions could not be included because I was unable to gain informed consent before the interactions took place. This was due to the dynamic unpredictability of the internet. To address this “issue”, the Ethics Committee instructed me to label my creative content online as “research”. There is no doubt that this would fundamentally shape user perceptions of my content and potentially alienate them from it. For postdigital ludic practice to reach its democratising potential, it must be perceived as a *practice* not “research”. It cannot even be perceived as “writing” nor “poetry” nor “art”. This is because these terms are linguistically connected to the histories and manifestations of patriarchal neo-liberal market capitalism and the hierarchies of the “human”; the discourses and structures which have dictated the theories and methodologies of the Humanities and the Academy more broadly (Braidotti 2019). This is not the intention of postdigital ludic practice at all; this would limit its potential. Sacrificing this type of collaborative element maintained the integrity of the research.

Although this has not limited the research nor jeopardised its outcomes, to my mind this evidences the rigidity of the established practices and methodologies of the Humanities and the Academy. There is clearly some work still to do in decolonising research approaches to optimise their value within the posthuman context (Braidotti 2019). As acknowledged in relation to the Literary Canon in chapter two, the pace of change in the Academy is slow, yet emerging postdisciplinary practices continue to rupture the Humanities. Practices which embrace collaboration as part of the creative process and as integral to intentional engagement with minoritarian voices.

Postdigital Ludic Practice: Posthuman Transformations

This research hypothesised that postdigital ludic practice would catalyse *jouissance* as a posthuman transformation. This was an ambitious aim. Whilst operating within established research frameworks of knowledge there would be no way postdigital ludic practice, even as a creative-critical hybrid toolkit, would be able to demonstrate and evidence “transformative” outcomes or results definitively, let alone those defined as beyond language (Barthes 1970). If *jouissance* resists definition, how could I account for it, even if I saw it? *Jouissance* represents the failures of language and hermeneutics so why express its potential and meaning through language, whether creatively or critically. Yet this research has demonstrated the potential for *jouissance* as captured and engaged with the relational heterogeneous assemblages postdigital ludic practice creates and is comprised of: the playful postdigital processes and behaviours of the “triological relationship” (Weight 2006); known or unknown multiple, sometimes minoritarian subjectivities that blur the boundaries of the “human” and the “non-human”; and, playful multi-layered, iterative digital texts. This research has demonstrated that postdigital ludic practice is embodied and embedded in this assemblage and is always in the process of becoming (Braidotti 2019). This research asserts that these becomings are posthuman and affective actualising *jouissance*. They are a transformative “we” (Todd 2016; Wu 2019) with plural and paradoxical affects beyond those transferred through language and hermeneutics, consequently they are sometimes missed in existing research frameworks (Tettegah and Garcia 2016).

This research operates as feminist activist research utilising my personal storytelling to destabilise established histories, identities and academic frameworks (Salem et al. 2022). Moreover, as a tool for the critical posthumanities (Braidotti 2019) it moves alongside feminist standpoint approaches, whilst recognising that Feminism alone no longer accounts for the pluralism and contradictions of the posthuman experience. This type of research is actively shaped by posthumanity and its performative interventions: it is subject and object; it is process and product; it is “within” not about. Postdigital ludic practice does not seek to reinscribe humanist traditions on posthuman potentialities but reveals new perspectives (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018) and therefore transgresses the limitations of humanist literary criticism. It does not seek simply to cultivate “intellect” or “knowing” nor divorce this from emotion (Felski 2015); in capturing dynamisms and continuums it recognises that there is

more to intellect than interpretation and reflection alone (Felski 2015). It is similar to knowing but does not seek to “make sense”: it becomes familiar with its own oddities, phantasmagoria and in doing so becomes more knowing. This is *jouissance*.

Postdigital ludic practice plays and experiments, thinks and feels; it is the pleasure and freedoms of postdigital modes and functions whilst simultaneously also the frustrations, chaos and anxiety of market capitalist systems and outcomes. It is perpetually shifting terminological and signifying systems which are crucial for change (Felski 2020). These posthuman rhizomatic flows demand new affective “languages”. Postdigital ludic practice is not another theoretical framework, it is a productive, dynamic practice of “we” which has the potential to change perceptions and formations whilst bringing others in; it develops faster than “research” can account for. These are the transformative posthuman potentialities it catalyses.

The Future of Postdigital Ludic Practice... Next Steps

In the future, I will investigate the potential of “affirmative collaborative ethics” (Braidotti 2019) particularly “thinking with” and “radical relationality” (Braidotti 2019). This approach recognises that the most rewarding and productive collaborators may be those who do not perceive themselves as “writers” let alone “researchers”. This aligns with the intentions of postdigital ludic practice as it is a democratising practice that creates opportunities for those not typically engaged in “writing” to play and participate. To actively encourage and cultivate connections with others I shall continue to disseminate my creative outputs online dispersed across various platforms and networks. This will help to nurture nomadic and pluralistic subjectivities whilst connecting with other “researchers”, “writers” and “makers” but also users more generally, those that do not have direct links to creative practice nor academia. I shall seek to cultivate a community who come together to work productively on future creative hybrid projects such as an exhibition of postdigital ludic creations. I foresee that I will be able to gain ethical approval for these future projects as any potential collaborators who chose to meet “in real life” and work on future projects will have the opportunity to give informed consent before they engage in the project. This does not necessarily have to be in

the form of the completion of traditional participant information sheets, which again might dissuade potential collaborators. To this end, I will seek to explore alternative ethical options such as video or simple language infographics co-produced with the community of collaborators. This would require retaining recordings and annotated notes to evidence the consent process. I perceive this as an exciting opportunity to productively develop the tools and methods of postdigital ludic practice and its outcomes, as a practice of the postdisciplinary critical posthumanities.

Need-less-to-say, I have learnt a lot about research processes, structures and models as well as writing models which do not align with the experiences of those with chronic illnesses and thus do not account for crip time (Kafer 2013). Since beginning this research, I have been affected by various bizarre temporalities and liminal spaces: before and after my diagnosis, the Covid 19 pandemic, recovering from my bowel resection. The uncertainty and immanence of crip time can be paralysing. I would like to consider the potential of postdigital ludic practice as a “quantum model” (Bolton and Gillett 2019) which might serve disabled, female “academics” more purposefully as research tools than existing frameworks. For instance, postdigital ludic practice has the potential to consider and integrate bio-, psycho-, social- and emotional factors into research practices which not only recognise our posthuman subjectivities, that is who we are, and the velocity of the posthuman condition, that is how we exist in the world, but constructively utilises these factors as significant influences. These factors may be redefined not only as drivers or catalysts for “research” but as flexible, powerfully interacting systems which inform the “properties” of that research and thus extend classical models. This has the potential to not only inform the cognitive processes of the research and decision making but this contextuality and entanglement might assist in the explanation of certain cognitive states and effects, including language models and semantics, memory and trauma. These energies might account for emerging properties, associations and inferences which, when combined, help to create new conceptual frameworks. The potential for postdigital ludic practice as a quantum model may bridge the gap between thinking and feeling.

Any productive developments of postdigital ludic practice will also continue to be engaged in the future of machines. I am keen to investigate the potential of their “language” that being

binary code. Whilst I tried to integrate the language of the machines within *Violen)t Existence* using code to build the website and ones and zeros to construct concrete poetry, I realise this has its limitations. Continued practice-led activities will explore the potential to develop my own hybrid language as modelled by Mez Breeze (2017, 2018) in her use of *Mezangelle*. I have already considered how I might plant playful clues within digital poems for users to find in order to decode this new “language”. This would not only offer the creative potential to develop a new language which resists the language of patriarchal capitalism, but to architect its meaning as inherently connected to the ludic structures of the digital poetry; users construct meaning through play. This would also productively develop and refine my definition of *synaesthetic synchronicity with machines*.

I am also keen to integrate the language of the machine, not simply to represent it. Although this research considered the potential of computational networks to mutate and reconfigure digital texts through their dissemination and distribution amongst these unknown communities, it did not consider how machines might perform alongside writers and users in the same space which may be possible through immersive reality technologies. I intend to continue to improve and develop my coding skills so that I will be able to program experiential spaces for the machine and user to perform together, generating creative outputs simultaneously. However, once a “space” is coded it cannot be open to interpretation; the execution of code once programmed can only ever “signify” one thing. Although errors or bugs in the code may stop the performance, collaborators may be able to “reprogram” the code to perform in new ways, I.E. by perceiving the “bug” as a new textual element or “hacking” the code.

It would also be interesting to consider how this code configures the “experiential” to augment writer and user perceptions: do these experiences take place in abstract “spaces” or concrete environments or “places”? To some extent our reality is already “augmented” by applications such as Google Maps and smart spaces which interact with geotags and the Internet of Things. Whilst the technologies required to access virtual and immersive applications and experiences are now mainstream and becoming more affordable, their programmes and associated processes are often more closely guarded ensuring their spectacle, commerciality and expense. Thus, it may be more productive to continue to utilise

and experiment with open-source, browser-based systems and applications. Whilst perhaps compromising the sense of immersion, they are at least accessible to many and may have the potential to architect experiential spaces in the future. As I say, this potential is worth investigating further particularly as this form of “mixed reality” technology continues to develop its socio-cultural functions.

This will likely be linked to further investigations into machine learning and neural networks as I appreciate there have been significant developments in technologies whilst working on this project. It will be interesting to consider the potential of a remixed literary artefact as produced by non-human Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) “collaborators”, which are already defined as white and male dominated technologies (Naji 2021), especially as this continues to be a huge growth area for technology and its socio-cultural functions. Although these generators may be able to “write” poetry, can they create the forms of digital poetry that postdigital ludic practice catalyses? Can they play with poetry? Or, does this remain the sole purview of the (post)human in digital poetry? This research has demonstrated how users are able to reach beyond the digital components of the text they play with; I’m not sure if machines can play in the same ways.

The “intelligence” of AI is never neutral: it has an interest to make specific things happen (Tambling 2025), it works with prediction, and its algorithms are competitive which is not necessarily play but gaming. These algorithms do “role-play” of sorts: are we engaged with users, chatbots or fictitious online “identities” known as “sockpuppets” (Kats 2020)? Does it matter? The more we play with these algorithms the more data we provide, the smarter they become and thus more effective capitalist tools (Srnicek 2017) which demands further (re)configurations of postdigital ludic practice if it is to maintain its transformative potential. Although this research recognises the hermeneutic potential of code, it does not capture the potential social dimensions of algorithms which intersect with social demographics and stratifications.

I recently completed some research on deepfakes (Wareham Morris 2024); through this process I developed a better understanding of deep learning algorithms operating within generative adversarial networks. Is an AI generated “poem” a literary deepfake? If it performs

like a poem, will audiences accept it is poetry? I also wonder how a “deepfake sockpuppet” (Wareham Morris 2024) would perform within digital texts. Would it be possible to pair a machine voice with my image as if it were impersonating me, or could I somehow “impersonate” an AI generated image? Or could another human user “face-swap” their face over mine? Face-swap images, applications and “how-to” videos proliferate the internet, so I wonder if the films of my live performances could be utilised to generate a deepfake. Deepfake technology has infiltrated various contexts including the media and creative industries (for example, the film industry (Golding 2021; Cameron 2021)) and has a record of being disseminated and shared quickly and frenetically, which perhaps brings new meaning to vigorous movement. There is certainly more research that could be done on the implications of this especially within the context of postdigital ludic practice.

I will investigate whether immersive technologies might account for a “fluid ontology” (Featherstone 2000) which simultaneously de-others the other, that being machines, by simultaneously othering the user. It suggests a potential to develop postdigital ludic practice as a future investigation into further transgressions of boundaries which seek to divide writers, users and computers (humans and non-humans) (Rachwał 2025) and engages with and cares for humans and (technological) others (Latour 2018) through translation (Latour 2005) and companionship (Haraway 2016) without writing of catastrophe or speculative futures.

Summary

In summary, this research makes the following original contributions to knowledge:

- postdigital ludic practice: an operational toolkit which catalyses posthuman potentialities including activism and *jouissance*.
- The application of this toolkit to create *Violen)t Existence*, an original multimodal iterative digital text which performs posthuman knowledges.
- Postdigital ludic practice is both process and product evidencing the postdisciplinary practices of the critical posthumanities.

My future research interests:

- Continue to utilise postdigital ludic practice as a mode of creative-critical posthuman productivities, whilst refining the tools and methods.
- Continue to develop my knowledge and understanding of machine “languages” including coding, AI algorithms and mixed realities to refine the function and application of synchronicity with machines as “fluid ontology” (Featherstone 2000).
- Pursue and investigate future posthuman and non-human collaborations through the processes of “affirmative collaborative ethics” (Braidotti 2019).
- Investigate crip time and its potential to (re)configure postdigital ludic practice as a “quantum model” (Bolton and Gillett 2019).

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