

# Beyond Maximalism: Resolving the Novelistic Incompatibilities of Realism, Paranoia, Omniscience, and Encyclopedism through Electronic Literature

*Além do maximalismo: resolvendo as incompatibilidades novelísticas de realismo, paranóia, onisciência e enciclopedismo por meio da literatura eletrônica*

DAVID THOMAS HENRY WRIGHT

Nagoya University, Japan

wright.david.thomas.henry.p6@f.mail.nagoya-u.ac.jp

CHRIS ARNOLD

University of Western Australia, Australia

chris.arnold@uwa.edu.au

---

## Abstract

In *The Maximalist Novel*, Stefano Ercolino defines a type of novel that displays multiform and hypertrophic tension. While Ercolino's definition accurately identifies and classifies a significant novel form, we argue that in print form these elements are incompatible with one another, which has resulted in criticisms of maximalist novels, as well as a number of maximalist novelists who have abandoned the form. While Ercolino argues that these incompatibilities represent an 'internal dialectic' of the genre, we argue that this is too conflicting to be stable as a novelistic form. These incompatibilities include multiple

(hybrid) realisms, the incompatibility of paranoid imagination with ethical commitment, and further incompatibilities of narratorial omniscience and an encyclopedic mode with a persuasive realism. By examining contemporary fictional works written by previously maximalist novelists, we reassess Ercolino's ten elements in order to identify the reasons why certain authors have moved beyond the limits of his definition. In so doing, we compare and contrast Ercolino's 'maximalist novel' with James Woods's 'hysterical realism' and John Johnston's 'novel of information multiplicity.' Using the Jonathan Franzen and Zadie Smith corpuses as examples, this paper speculates on the future form of the novel as it progresses into the 21st Century. From this literary interrogation, we apply these conclusions to digital creative practice by developing the digital novel, *The Perfect Democracy* (funded by the Australia Council for the Arts, 2021). This practice-led research work takes as its subject the entire population of contemporary Australia. The digital acts of scrolling, linking, and customized coded digital writing formats enable the maximalism of the print text to be lightly navigated. Electronic literature, therefore, enables the ambitions of the maximalist novel to extend the tentacular novel in new directions.

---

## Keywords

maximalist novel | realism | relatedness | paranoia | narratorial omniscience

---

## Resumo

Em *O Romance Maximalista*, Stefano Ercolino define um tipo de romance que apresenta uma tensão multiforme e hipertrófica. Embora a definição de Ercolino identifique e classifique com precisão uma forma significativa de romance, neste artigo argumentamos que na forma impressa estes elementos são incompatíveis entre si, o que resultou em críticas aos romances maximalistas, tendo levado vários romancistas maximalistas a abandonar esta forma. Enquanto Ercolino argumenta que essas incompatibilidades representam uma 'dialética interna' do género, argumentamos que isso é muito conflitante para ser estável como forma romanesca. Essas incompatibilidades incluem múltiplos realismos (híbridos), a incompatibilidade da imaginação paranóica com o compromisso ético,

além das incompatibilidades da onisciência narrativa e de um modo enciclopédico com um realismo persuasivo. Ao examinar obras ficcionais contemporâneas escritas por romancistas anteriormente maximalistas, reavaliaremos os dez elementos de Ercolino a fim de identificar as razões pelas quais certos autores ultrapassaram os limites da sua definição. Ao fazê-lo, comparamos e contrastamos o “romance maximalista” de Ercolino com o “realismo histórico” de James Woods e o “romance da multiplicidade da informação” de John Johnston. Usando o *corpus* de Jonathan Franzen e Zadie Smith como exemplos, este artigo especula sobre a forma futura do romance à medida que avança para o século XXI. A partir dessa interrogação literária, aplicamos essas conclusões à prática criativa digital envolvida no desenvolvimento do romance digital *The Perfect Democracy* (financiado pelo Australia Council for the Arts, 2021). Este trabalho de investigação pela prática toma como assunto toda a população da Austrália contemporânea. Os atos digitais de *scrolling*, hiperligação e os formatos de escrita digital codificados e personalizados permitem que o maximalismo do texto impresso seja navegado levemente. A literatura eletrônica, portanto, permite que as ambições do romance maximalista estendam o romance tentacular em novas direções.

romance maximalista | realismo | parentesco | paranóia | onisciência narrativa

---

## Palavras-chave

### Introduction

Stefano Ercolino defines the maximalist novel as ‘an aesthetically hybrid genre of the contemporary novel that develops in the second half of the twentieth century.... “Maximalist,” for the multiform maximizing and hypertrophic tension of the narrative; “novel,” because the texts... are indeed novels’ (xi). He lists Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and *Mason & Dixon* (1997), David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001), and Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (2004) as examples of the term, and classifies the maximalist novel using ten elements: length, encyclopedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narratorial omniscience, paranoid

imagination, intersemioticity, ethical commitment, and hybrid realism. While Ercolino's ten elements accurately identify and classify a significant novel form that has emerged, we argue that these elements are incompatible with one another, which has resulted in criticisms of maximalist novels, as well as having caused a number of maximalist novelists to abandon the form. While Ercolino argues that the incompatibilities represent an 'internal dialectic' of the genre, we argue that they are too conflicting to be stable as a novelistic form. They combine, for example, incompatibilities of multiple (hybrid) realisms: paranoid imagination along with ethical commitment, of narratorial omniscience and an encyclopedic mode along with a persuasive realism. By examining contemporary fictional works written by previously maximalist novelists, we reassess Ercolino's ten elements in order to identify the reasons why certain authors have moved beyond the limits of his definition, and how this may impact the novel form as it progresses into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In so doing, we compare and contrast Ercolino's 'maximalist novel' with James Woods's 'hysterical realism,' and John Johnston's 'novel of information multiplicity.' Finally, we propose that these issues can be resolved through born-digital modes, through the practice-led Australia Council for the Arts research project *The Perfect Democracy* (2021). This project takes as its subject the entirety of Australian society as its subject and attempts to resolve the print predicament of the maximalist novel through digital practice-led research.

### Hybrid and Hysterical Realism

Ercolino claims that in maximalist novels the reader is faced with a unique form of realism, one which is 'heavily conditioned by the powerful antireferential and tautological friction of the artistic act running throughout the entire system of the arts in the twentieth century' (158). He defines this as 'hybrid realism.' This is Ercolino's final and most important element.

Literary critic James Wood, in his review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* ("Human, All Too Inhuman"), defines the 'hysterical realist' genre, which he also classifies with similar texts that Ercolino uses to define the 'maximalist novel'. Wood is critical of these 'big, ambitious social novels' for their conceptual, inhuman characters, which he argues result from their insistence on relatedness. He uses the term 'hysterical' to denote the perpetual-motion of the above-mentioned novels' plots.

*The Oxford Companion to English Literature* states that, as a literary term, 'realism' is so widely used it is more or less meaningless except 'when used in contradistinction to some other movement.' In *How Fiction Works*, Wood argues that literary realism is the origin from which all other literature emanates:

[Realism] teaches everyone else; it schools its own truants: it is what allows magical realism, hysterical realism, [...] to exist[...] Chekhov's challenge—"Ibsen just doesn't know life. In life it simply isn't like that"—is as radical now as it was a century ago, because

forms must continually be broken. The true writer[...] is one who must always be acting as if life were a category beyond anything the novel had yet grasped; as if life itself were always on the verge of becoming conventional. (247–8)

Chekhov's revolution, Wood concludes, is that his characters have the ability to forget that they are characters, by wriggling out of the story given them into the 'bottomless freedom of disappointment,' (90) allowing their inner lives to run at their own speed. It is this form of Chekhovian realism that Wood argues is not possible in the maximalist/hysterical realist novels.

Chekhov's stories, his style, form, and preoccupations are far removed from those values Ercolino uses to define the maximalist novel. Not only is Chekhov not a maximalist writer, he is also not a novelist. It would therefore come as no surprise that the Chekhovian realism Wood endorses is incompatible with the maximalist novel, as it is essentially its antithesis.

Yet both Ercolino and Wood use the same term: realism. Esty argues that debates over literary realism, what he calls 'realism wars,' have been ongoing since the late Victorian era. Ercolino's description of 'hybrid realism' suggests that the maximalist novels attempt to resolve the realism wars by representing multiple 'realisms' within a single work. In response to Wood's criticism, Ercolino argues that 'realism' and 'postmodern' are not incompatible. Wood's position, however, is that such hybridity is not possible, as the interrelatedness necessary for the hybridity to exist ultimately taints the Chekhovian realist aesthetic, even if isolated moments within the novel successfully depict it. In *Information Multiplicity*, similar to the maximalist/hysterical realist genre, Johnston proposes the 'novel of information multiplicity', arguing that this form emerges in an environment created by information and web technologies. Johnston and Wood concur that in these works the antirealist impulse ultimately defines the novels' realism. In either case, Ercolino's element 'hybrid realism' does not resolve the realism war, but is merely another example of it.

Wood's position regarding the incompatibility of 'realism' and 'postmodern' can be noted in his review of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. Though the 'maximalist novel' and 'hysterical realism' had yet to be defined when Franzen (1996) wrote *The Corrections*, Franzen was aware of the predicament Wood articulates: that excessive relatedness can result in an unpersuasive realism:

I was torturing the story, stretching it to accommodate ever more of those things-in-the-world that impinge on the enterprise of fiction writing. The work of transparency and beauty and obliqueness that I wanted to write was getting bloated with issues... The novelist has more and more to say to readers who have less and less time to read: Where to find the energy to engage with a culture in crisis when the crisis consists in the impossibility of engaging with the culture? (66)

In discussing his writing process, Franzen claims that the dehumanizing quality of contemporary character is a reflection of reality, as in contemporary society our lives have become inhumanly interconnected. He is therefore arguing against writing a ‘novel of information multiplicity,’ stressing a desire to move away from the antirealist impulse that Johnston and Wood argue characterizes the work of Pynchon, DeLillo, etc. As a novelist, Franzen wishes to inform and report to the reader on the state of the culture. He concedes, however, that the novel no longer serves a function as social instruction or reportage. Even so, Franzen maintains that such a novel should strive to be all-encompassing (82). In other words, he champions maximalism as an ideal in and of itself. His solution, then, is to create a ‘broad-canvas novel’ that attempts to make interconnectedness human, what Wood calls a ‘softened DeLilloism’. In *The Corrections*, Franzen retains the core ambitions of the maximalist novel, while moving beyond Ercolino’s definition. Wood praises this ‘softened’ approach, but believes the artistic success of Franzen’s novel is not because of its extreme interconnectedness, but in spite of it. Even if the ambitions of the maximalist/hysterical realist novelist can coexist with Chekhovian realism, Wood argues that they are not comparable. The connection between a ‘malaise in ourselves and in our culture’ is purely conceptual and muddies the Chekhovian realism that centers the novel. This emergence and moving beyond the maximalist novel, therefore, suggests a deadlock with the capacity of the contemporary novel form to ‘pin down an entire writhing culture.’ These restrictions evolved specifically from New Criticism, which actively promoted and encouraged Ercolino’s print-based attempt to understand maximalism. These issues are emulated in early digital literature. Works such as Stuart Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden* (1992) extend such aesthetics into the digital realm. In the last decades of digital literature, however, these aesthetics have been reevaluated by various practitioners and theorists. For example, Wright (2020) argues that Calvino’s values of lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency epitomize contemporary digital literary works. These values, we also argue, enable the maximalist novel’s problems to be resolved in digital space.

### **Paranoid Imagination, Ethical Commitment, and the Influence of Kafka**

Ercolino argues that ‘paranoia is one of the most characteristic elements of the postmodern narrative universe’ (105). He continues: ‘Everything is linked: this is the unshakeable conviction of the paranoid, a conviction that finds its structural equivalent in the direct or indirect interconnection of all the stories, of all the characters, and of all the events that proliferate in maximalist novels’ (111). Paranoia, then, can be regarded as one of the ‘antirealist impulses’ Ercolino notes in describing ‘hybrid realism.’ Likewise, Johnston argues that Pynchon and DeLillo’s works are characterized by paranoia. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Johnston suggests, paranoia is ‘no longer designated a mental disorder but rather a critical method of information retrieval’ (62). The paranoid imagination Ercolino defines can be observed not only in the novels described, but also in Franz

Kafka's (1927). Pynchon (in Bloom), DeLillo (in DePietro), Wallace, Rushdie, Smith (in *Changing My Mind*), and Bolaño (in Klenemeier) have all cited the importance of Kafka in relation to their work. For the contemporary maximalist novelist, Kafka's influence appears, fittingly, inescapable.

*Amerika* evokes the dreamlike claustrophobia and agoraphobia typical of Kafka's novels, which is due to the novel's paranoid imagination. The narrative relies on coincidence and excessive relatedness. The difference between Kafka's novel and the novels described, however, is its relation to 'real' phenomena. While informed by research of the present, Hofmann (in Kafka, *Amerika*, 1996) claims Kafka's book is 'up to the minute, with its telephones and gramophones, electric bells and electric torches, lifts, the Brooklyn Bridge... [and] an early reference to Coca-Cola' (xiii)). From the opening paragraph, in which the Statue of Liberty is seen holding a sword, it becomes clear that Kafka's *Amerika* bears little resemblance to a 'real' experience of a European immigrant in the United States. The interconnectedness is persuasive as Kafka establishes a dream-like quality and logic. Unlike the hysterical realists, whose close examination of real-world issues creates immediate, enclosed context, Kafka in his novels eludes such readings. Given contemporary widespread information and global awareness, however, writing of other countries, institutions, or cultural groups with such disconnect from 'real' phenomena presents ethical representational issues.

In her review of *The Maximalist Novel*, N Katherine Hayles notes that Ercolino does not make reference to the influence of information technologies, databases, computational media:

much of the impetus toward the massive information flows apparent in the examples derives from the creation and dissemination of the personal computer, the emergence of the web, the spread of social media, and the pervasiveness of Internet search engines. (521)

These developments, Hayles continues, undoubtedly explain why the maximalist novel differs from other big encyclopedic modernist novels (e.g. Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Joyce's *Ulysses*). Similarly, these developments (i.e. emergence of the web, spread of social media, etc.) highlight a significant difference between the paranoid imagination displayed in the works of Kafka and in the contemporary maximalist novelists. In other words, one cannot write (or indeed read) as Kafka did in the contemporary digital age.

In the information/networked age, a novel that is structured by paranoia yet aspires towards ethical commitment (as Ercolino claims the maximalist novel does) is ultimately at odds with itself. In Bolaño's 2666, the heavy interrelatedness of the novel's structure draws a comparison between the female homicides of Ciudad Juárez and World War II and the Holocaust. It is difficult, however, to determine in what capacity one atrocity can or should illuminate another, and how a reader should make this comparison. Indeed, 2666's structure explicitly segregates these components. Ercolino

posits that his elements can be split into two camps, playing ‘different roles in the *internal dialectic* of the genre’ and that a ‘*hierarchy* of the materials is always presupposed which guarantees the genre’s morphological and symbolic *hold*’ (114). This he labels the chaos/cosmos function: ‘anarchy versus order, centrifugal forces versus centripetal forces, chaos versus cosmos’ (115). In 2666, then, the relationship between female homicides of Ciudad Juárez and the Holocaust could either be ‘meaningful’ (cosmos) or simply two independent events that have no correlation (chaos). The novel’s ‘paranoid imagination’ that informs the novel’s interrelated structure, however, both allows and encourages parallels between the female homicides and the Holocaust. Not only the structure, but the meaning of the work is defined by its paranoia.

The very notion of a ‘cosmos’ function is at odds with maximalist novels’ social realism; in the case of 2666, the social realism of the very relentless, specific, almost journalistic approach to the female homicides is at odds with a parallel to the Holocaust. Despite the fact that maximalist novels are ‘monopolized by themes of great historical, political, and social relevance,’ addressing themes such as history, war, drugs, capitalism, and technology (Ercolino, 136–7), the use of paranoid imagination to draw connections between these themes lacks ‘ethical commitment’ as it draws immoral parallels. If the aim of the maximalist novel is ‘ethical commitment,’ it is at odds with the paranoid imagination that informs these novels’ structures.

Interconnectivity is a fundamental characteristic of digital literature. Early hypertext works, such as Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* (1987), are hypertextually interconnected. While in such narratives ‘everything is linked’, the linkage is not necessarily through paranoid connections. While works such as Moulthrop’s *Victory Garden* do promote such paranoid imaginative connectivity, hyperlinks or other digital structural devices do not rely on paranoid connections. Digital narratives therefore offer the possibility to fulfil the tentacular ambition of the contemporary maximalist novelist without having to resort to paranoid imaginative structures.

### **Narratorial Omniscience and Cliché**

Since Wood’s review of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* in which he defines and criticizes ‘hysterical realism,’ Smith has written of her shifting approach to the contemporary novel. Smith argues that such ‘hysteria’ is necessary, as in contemporary culture the immediacy of news, political commentary, and satire means that the fiction writer who addresses contemporary issues or institutions risks cliché: ‘Even if you find [Pynchon, DeLillo, Foster Wallace, et al.] obtuse, they can rarely be accused of cliché, and that... is the place where everything dies.’

Smith further explores her desire to make connections in her essay “Rereading Barthes and Nabokov.” She finds Barthes’s notion of reader authority appealing as a reader, but paralyzing when applied to the act of writing itself. *White Teeth*, for example, is constructed in such a way as to represent a vast multiplicity of voices within the



culture. The text stretches itself to accommodate and engage with a profusion of public and private issues. To avoid plot immobility, coincidence, Dickensian caricature and paranoid imagination are utilized, which has resulted in Wood's criticisms. In her essay, Smith contrasts Barthes's approach with Nabokov's assertion of authorial privilege:

Barthes spoke of the pleasure of the text, Nabokov of asking his students to read "with your brain and spine... the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wishes you to feel." Barthes, though, had no interest in what the author felt or wished you to feel, which is where my trouble starts. (43)

This trouble is the desire to create an authorial text that accounts for the birth of the reader(s) without resorting to excessive interrelatedness or the potential cliché of twenty-first-century bourgeois political apathy.

Smith attempts to resolve this trouble in her fourth novel *NW* (2012). Stylistically, it marks a departure from her other work, utilizing a combination of first- and third-person perspective, numbered fragments, and typographical arrangements. *NW* does not display 'paranoid imagination,' as connected events become tangential, having quiddity in and of themselves. Particularity is based primarily on class, rather than ethnicity. Similar to Irie Jones at the conclusion of *White Teeth*, at the conclusion of *NW* Natalie Blake, feeling decentered and fraudulent, sets up anonymous sex encounters via the Internet. Unlike Irie in *White Teeth*, however, the 'decentered' form that reflects Keisha/Natalie's decentered sense of identity makes this choice human and persuasive, rather than conceptual or hysterical. At the novel's conclusion, after Natalie's affairs have been exposed and she loses track of her children in a pet store, Smith writes: 'She raised her head from her newspaper. She called out. Nothing. She walked to the fish, the lizards, the dogs and the cats. Nowhere. She reassured herself she wasn't the *hysterical* [emphasis mine] type' (288).

A significant difference between *White Teeth* and *NW* is the later novel's use of omniscient narration. In *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator*, Paul Dawson argues that twenty-first century fiction has seen a revival of omniscient narration and that this emerges from an 'encounter with some of the technical experiments of postmodern fiction' (4). In the case of *White Teeth*, Dawson argues that there are

substantial passages of digressive and garrulous commentary throughout the novel which directly address the reader. ...the narrator employs the editorial "we" to rhetorically invoke a general consciousness. (128)

In *NW*, however, such an authorial voice is absent. Though the novel fluctuates between four different characters' perspectives, the points of view themselves remain that of the characters. *NW* has more in common with the Modernist novels than the

omniscient perspective of *White Teeth*. *NW* would not be classified as a maximalist novel. As a result, any intersemioticity or diegetic exuberance is justified as being the voice of the character. Smith's reduced omniscience and interconnectedness in *NW* suggests a stylistic return to the Modernist novel in order to both account for the birth of the reader(s) without resorting to excess or cliché. While a text such as *NW* rejects Johnston's assertion that the literary form must be 'machinic', it contains characters who are capable of interacting with such information systems. It therefore remains both contemporary (i.e., of the networked/digital age) and human.

In digital literature, challenging the very chronology of print text allows writers to combat cliché. Despite attempts to catalogue digital literature through genre (Rettberg 2019) or chronological generational approaches (Flores 2019), historically digital literature is characterized by experimentation and an impulse to 'make it new'. Through challenging and reimagining the very concept of print representation, digital literary works resist being the place where 'everything dies'. Furthermore, frequently digital literary works allow for an omniscient sense of navigation, presenting omniscience (or omniscient possibilities) without relying on a paranoid interconnectivity.

### **A Light Encyclopedic Mode**

Ercolino argues that a key element in defining the maximalist novel is an 'encyclopedic mode.' Encyclopedism is not the ambition of the maximalist novelist, rather it is a tool in 'attempting to satisfy its synthetic ambition' (40). Ercolino cites Italo Calvino, crediting him with pointing out that the desire to write encyclopedic works was one of the strongest aspirations of modernism (27). In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Calvino (1988) addresses the encyclopedic under his lecture on multiplicity. Calvino's own later novels reflect this value. What is not present in the later novels of Calvino, however, is a sense of Chekhovian/lyrical realism. Even in a novel such as *If on a winter's night a traveler*, where particular chapters display a sense of realism, it is framed and presented as a construct.

As well as a less forced interconnectedness, Smith expresses a predilection for 'controlled little gasps of prose, as opposed to the baggy novel' and an admiration for these qualities in the works of Kafka, Borges, and Cortázar. Smith goes on to ask, if it is 'this reverence, this care, this suppression of ego that Wood wants to see from us?' This reverence is shown in *NW*, but is taken a step further in Smith's *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013). Smith still interweaves particularities, but reduces this density so as to lighten the amount of reality imposed on her characters and the text. In other words, *The Embassy of Cambodia* depicts Chekhovian realism.

This opposes Ercolino's first element: length. Smith's rejection of length, however, does not necessarily reject the core ambitions of the maximalist novel. It does not necessitate a reversion to literary minimalism. Rather, Smith's predilection could be regarded as a desire for what Calvino labels lightness. For Calvino, lightness is understood

in terms of its binary opposite, weight. His reason for treasuring lightness is a desire to write in such a way as to represent his own time, to identify himself with the collective and individual energies propelling the events of the century. The weight of all these issues, however, becomes problematic when attempting to write cohesive, dramatic, engaging fiction. As Ercolino points out, the problem with the encyclopedic project in the postmodern is that it ‘explodes, crushed by its own weight’ (29). Borrowing from Greek mythology, Calvino compares this type of weighty text to the stare of the Medusa in that it paralyses language and narrative. This, however, is not to suggest that a writer should ignore the weight of the world. Though Calvino uses binary opposites to define his values, his use of binary opposition does not necessitate the negation of the opposing value. Like Perseus, who decapitated the Medusa and carried its head, the writer should be light without negating or neglecting weight.

Laura Miller (in Dawson) argues that the rise of the maximalist/hysterical realist movement was in fact a shift in American fiction away from minimalism, ‘exemplified in the tradition from Hemingway to Carver’ (162), to maximalism. Smith’s *The Embassy of Cambodia* therefore is not simply a return to literary minimalism, but a move beyond maximalism in that it retains the ambition of the maximalist novel while shedding length/weight. In other words, it exhibits Calvino’s value of lightness.

Smith’s *NW* and *The Embassy of Cambodia* suggest that while depicting interconnectivity is possible and even potentially persuasive, it is not a vital revelation. In the case of *NW*, while the stories are interconnected, this is primarily to justify its structure as a novel. In fact, *The Embassy of Cambodia*, with its Willesden setting, reads almost as an *NW* offcut. This brings into question the necessity for the ‘lyrical realist’ novel as an appropriate form to depict contemporary culture, and whether or not it will persist for reasons other than tradition or money. Digital narratives offer writers another possibility for addressing such social, cultural, and aesthetic predicaments.

### **Resolving print predicaments through digital practice-led research**

From this analysis of the maximalist novel, we developed the digital novel *The Perfect Democracy*. As a writer, Wright’s creative appetite was identical to that of the maximalist novelists in that the objective was to capture the entirety of contemporary (Australian) culture. Wright endeavoured to retain the tentacular ambition of the maximalist novel, while attempting to resolve the above defined problems in digital space. *The Perfect Democracy* is an Australia Council for the Arts-funded practice-led research project that attempts to resolve the predicament with the contemporary print maximalist novel. Practice-led research is here defined by Smith and Dean (2009) as:

an activity which can appear in a variety of guises across the spectrum of practice and research. It can be basic research carried out independent of creative work (though it may be subsequently applied to it); research conducted in the process of shaping an artwork;

or research which is the documentation, theorisation and contextualisation of an artwork — and the process of making it — by its creator. (3)

*The Perfect Democracy* is an example of practice-led research that attempts to extend, subtend, and resolve the literary research conducted above. It takes as its subject the entire population of contemporary Australia. It is also about the impossibility of representing this in a work of fiction. The aspirations of the novel reflect Gertrude Stein's ambitions in writing *The Making of Americans, Being a History of a Family's Progress* (1925). We argue that if digital narratives are to extend and resolve print aesthetic issues in digital space, then practice-led research conducted using this methodology is requisite for digital literary practitioners.

Initially, this work was created as a print text, albeit one that displays what Hayles (2009) calls the 'mark of the digital' (159), such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) or *Only Revolutions* (2006). As such a vast subject is impossible to represent in a work of fiction, Calvino's values — lightness, quickness, crystalline exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency — have been employed. *Visible* images of Australian currency have therefore been used as a structural device to remove *weight* by representing the whole society from the richest to the poorest in the *quickest* way possible. A *multitude* of simultaneous writing formats and voices are used to *precisely* depict characterisation. These variations are *consistently* employed. Such an approach seems in contrast with earlier digital literary works, such as those by Moulthrop and Joyce mentioned above. Aarseth (1997) argues that in such digital works 'nontrivial' effort is required to traverse the text. While digital space has the capacity to further complicate, intertwine, and digress text, it also has the capacity to lighten such complications. This is the aesthetic ambition of *The Perfect Democracy*: to lighten the 'nontrivial' effort required to traverse the text.

From a narrative perspective, the text follows the fallout from the passing of Australia's wealthiest citizen. On his deathbed, Caradoc Barnard decides to leave his entire inheritance to Australian babies born on the day of his death. The introduction of each currency offers a new character from a new social/economic class with a new form of writing. The \$100 note is associated with the will of mining magnate Caradoc Barnard, who opts to distribute all of his money to Australian children born on the day of his death. The \$50 note depicts Barnard's daughter, Siobhan Barnard, in the form of three failed business plans. The \$20 note depicts the legal proceedings between the Barnard estate and Dorothy Beckham, an exclusive escort Caradoc promised to fund indefinitely. The \$10 note follows a discussion between Dorothy Beckham's cosmetic surgeon and her recovering oxycodone addict daughter. Their discussions are simultaneously presented side-by-side, interjected by stream-of-consciousness writing that appear as text messages that simultaneously depict the two characters' internal thoughts and conversational dialogue. The Australian coins (\$2, \$1, 50c, 20c, 10c, 5c) follow recent

immigrant and illiterate Australians undertaking English classes in lieu of job search for Centrelink payments. The \$5 section presents an objective voice to depict a young mother struggling to look after her baby, who was born one minute after midnight, thus missing Barnard's gift. Like the final chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*, this stark objective perspective will contrast with the subjective voices of the rest of the work. This work is interjected by a short soliloquy by the father of the young mother's child, who has absconded to Bali to avoid responsibility.

The e-book is not, definitionally speaking, electronic literature. While Rettberg (2019) argues that 'e-books have in the past two decades had significant effects on the way that literature is published, distributed and consumed' (6), he claims that they are their own category as they are not 'born digital'. The e-book seeks to emulate two print book forms: the book (with turning of pages) and the scroll, with the single page forever scrolling onwards from start to finish. In *The Perfect Democracy*, the digital 'scroll' or 'scrolling' allows for a light and quick digital navigation that allows the reader to comprehend the maximalism of the work. This is largely due to the 'crystalline' structure that is enabled through the non-paranoid interconnectivity and visibility of Australian currency. It presents a very clear and visible structure of rich to poor, that hints at the approaching infinite experience within Australian culture in the quickest way possible. It is also presented as a menu at the top, allowing linking between sections. This linking achieves what Landow (2006) calls a 'fundamentally intertextual system', that has 'the capacity to emphasize intertextuality in a way that page-bound text in [print] books cannot' (55). In *The Perfect Democracy*, everything is interconnected literally, persuasively, and diegetically, though not paranoically. Unlike a print maximalist novel, one can quickly, lightly, and visibly navigate this maximalism 'from above', enabling the maximalist reader to essentially have their cake and eat it too. The writing is made light without negating or neglecting weight.

Multiple writing forms enhanced by digital functionality are employed within *The Perfect Democracy*. All of these functionalities strive towards simultaneity. In *Hopscotch* (1966), Cortazar writes:

[...]that of making an accomplice of the reader, a traveling companion. Simultaneize him, provided that the reading will abolish reader's time and substitute author's time. Thus the reader would be able to become a coparticipant and cosufferer of the experience through which the novelist is passing, at the same moment and in the same form. All artistic tricks are of no use in obtaining it: the only thing worth anything is the material in gestation, the experiential immediacy (transmitted through words, of course, but the least aesthetic words possible; this is where we get the 'comic' novel, anticlimaxes, irony, so many other directional arrows pointing towards the other thing).

Cortazar's 'anti-novel' is one that requires the reader to flip around the book-bound object, which helps establish the various voices' independence and simultaneity. *The Perfect Democracy* seeks to extend this concept into digital realms. Palimpsestic writing is used to lighten the density of the technical language within which the characters' voices are presented. Inspired by Iranian author Shahriar Mandanipour's *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (2009), this theoretical form of writing was proposed in Wright (2018). In the \$100, \$50, and \$20 sections, this functionality is employed. Here, the lightness of the characters' thoughts is situated within the paralyzing, bureaucratic, weighty density of the 'original' legal and business texts: Caradoc Barnard's will, Siobhan Barnard's business plans, and the Beckham v Barnard legal case.

In the \$50 section, the three failed business plans are presented on a 3D triangular prism that can be navigated. One can read these parts simultaneously, by dragging them around. The text at one point also cross-sections across the planes with the enlarged, emphatic phrase: I AM BROKE. Here, the 'scroll'-like form of traditional reading is interrupted by the 3D object.

The \$10 section utilizes a dialogue and stream-of-consciousness that appears simultaneously as direct messages. The conversation between the two central characters (and waitress) is presented in the center, while their thoughts are presented on either side. This form is inspired in part by Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*'s first two chapters and the form of writing that inspired *Little Emperor Syndrome* (2018), as outlined in Wright (2021).

Zadie Smith's notion of 'controlled little gasps of prose' highlights that Ercolino's length is not a necessary condition for the maximalist novel. Where the print novelist must rely on recapitulation to weave together the narrative's shifting points of view, by contrast, *The Perfect Democracy*'s formal characteristics in the coins section shows the reader that the characters' concurrent perceptions are equivalent—their 'tapes' occupy the same space, and each function the same way. The coins' conceptual tapes are one way that electronic literature is able to trade off space for time. As Cayley (2018) argues, 'Textuality is temporal' (321). Framing his discussion around Jim Rosenberg's Storyspace works, and illustrating with *The Barrier Frames* and *Intergrams*, Cayley highlights the processual character of the machine's performance. The reader participates in parallel, if not overlapping, processes of navigation and reading to shape the temporality of the reading experience (317-321). The coins section produces a similar effect: the reader is required to restructure the flow of time, as reflected in the flow of the text along the tape. The parallel incidence of these processes is further highlighted by the top line: by flowing left-to-right, the tape draws attention to the temporality of the reading process and the action of memory. It draws out an awareness of the reading process itself, of the material structure of the English language. Over longer gasps of prose, the text challenges the reader to maintain contexts in the opposite order that English tends to present them: objects before subjects; verbs sometimes come too late to be applied to objects that have flowed offscreen.

The final §5 section has a bouncing text, overlapping the central text. Here, again, the sense of overlapping challenges the traditional text, but also the hierarchy of the ‘main’ story being told. The overlapping soliloquy is an irritant to the central story, clouding the view, and literally depicting the hierarchy of the two texts.

Another difference between the maximalist novel and the electronic text is the capacity for multimodality. This is a fairly obvious and well-worn difference when discussing printed and electronic texts, but it is not to be underestimated in this instance, where plurality is implied by a descent through socio-economic strata.

### Conclusion

Through practice-led research, *The Perfect Democracy* attempts to extend, subvert, and subvert problems of the maximalist novel, a form that emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century and continues to this day. More broadly, this practice-led research attempts to illustrate that predicaments that arise within the print novel can be resolved, extended, and expanded through digital functionality and electronic literature forms. As Rettberg (2019) argues, electronic literature:

[...]not only takes us forward to explore new horizons but also on a retrospective journey that can lead to better understanding of how the past of literature propels us toward its future (6).

Hysterical and paranoid interconnectivity can be resolved through non-paranoid and visible interconnectivity. Narratorial omniscience can be expressed through navigational tools. Cliché in contemporary realism can be challenged by reimagining realism through new narrative forms. And the broad ambitions of the contemporary novelists can be imagined and navigated through light, quick, exact, visible, multiplicitous, and consistent values and forms. *The Perfect Democracy* is an example of digital literary creative practice that confirms the importance of the link between digital and print literature. Despite many declarations that the book is dead, Pressman (2009) argues that the ‘fetishization of the book-bound nature of the codex as reading object has, in some respects, always been the case for certain strains of literature, experimental writing in particular.’ This works both ways. As digitality and experimental digital forms continue to influence the ‘book-bound reading object’, so too will print predicaments and experiments influence new forms of electronic literature.

## Bibliography

- Aarseth, Espen J. 1997. *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Bolaño, Roberto. 2009. 2666. Translated by Natasha Wimmer. London: Picador.
- Bloom, Harold. 1986. *Thomas Pynchon*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Calvino, Italo. 1981. *If on a winter's night a traveler*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- . 1988. *Six Memos for The Next Millennium*. London: Vintage.
- Cayley, John. 2018. *Grammalepsy: Essays on Digital Language Art*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Cortázar, Julio. 1966. *Rayuela*. New York: Pantheon.
- Danielewski, Mark Z. 2000. *House of Leaves*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- . 2006. *Only Revolutions*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Dawson, Paul. 2013. *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- DeLillo, Don. 1977. *Underworld*. New York: Scribner.
- DePietro, Thomas. 2005. *Conversations with Don DeLillo*. Jackson: University of Mississippi.
- Ercolino, Stefano. 2014. *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Esty, Jed. 2016. "Realism Wars." *Novel* 49(2): 316-342. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-3509067>.
- Flores, Leo. 2019. "Third generation electronic literature." *Electronic Book Review*.  
<https://doi.org/10.7273/axyj-3574>.
- Franzen, Jonathan. 2001. *The Corrections*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hayles, N. K. 2016. "Maxing Out the Novel". *Novel* 49(3): 519-522. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-3651278>.
- Johnston, John. 1998. *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation*. The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore.
- Joyce, Michael. 1987. *afternoon, a story*. Eastgate Systems, Inc: Watertown.
- Kafka, Franz. 1966. *Amerika (The Man Who Disappeared)*. Translated by Michael Hofmann. London: Penguin Books.
- . 1974. *Amerika*, translated by Edwain Muir. New York: Shocken Books.
- Landow, George. 2006. *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Moulthrop, Stuart. 1992. *Victory Garden*. Watertown: Eastgate Systems, Inc.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. 1982. *Lectures on Russian Literature*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "hysteria, n.", July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7750031519>.
- Pressman, Jessica. 2009. "Bookishness: The New Fate of Reading in the Digital Age." *Michigan Quarterly Review* XLVIII(4). <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0048.402>.
- Rettberg, Scott. 2019. *Electronic Literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Smith, Hazel, and Roger T. Dean, 2009. *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Smith, Zadie. 2001 "This is how it feels to me." *The Guardian*, October 13, 2001. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/oct/13/fiction.afghanistan>.
- . 2001. *White Teeth*. New York: Vintage International.
- . 2009. *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- . 2012. *NW*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- . 2013. *The Embassy of Cambodia*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Stein, Gertrude. 1925. *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress*. New York: Spuyten Duyvil Publishing.
- Wood, James. 2000a. "Human, All Too Inhuman." *The New Republic Online*, July 24, 2000. <https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman>.



- Wood, James. 2000b. *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*. New York: Picador.
- Wood, James. 2001. "What the Dickens" *The Guardian*, November 9, 2001.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/nov/09/fiction.reviews>.
- . 2008. *How Fiction Works*. New York: Picador.
- . 2012. "Books of the Year" *The New Yorker*, December 17, 2012.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/books-of-the-year>.
- Wright, David Thomas Henry and Arnold, Chris. 2018. *Little Emperor Syndrome*.  
<https://www.littleemperorsyndrome.com>.
- Wright, David Thomas Henry. 2018. "Writing for' with Authority: Theorizing an Electronic Edition of Shahriar Mandanipour's Censoring an Iranian Love Story." *MATLIT: Materialities of Literature* 6 (3):83-92. [https://doi.org/10.14195/2182-8830\\_6-3\\_7](https://doi.org/10.14195/2182-8830_6-3_7).
- . 2020. 'Italo Calvino's *Six Memos* as ethical imperative in J.R. Carpenter's *The Gathering Cloud*', Digital Scholarship in the Humanities. <https://academic.oup.com/dsh/article-abstract/35/3/652/5556421>
- . 2021. 'Extending Modernist Stream-of-consciousness Aesthetics: Digital Variations on William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*', Digital Scholarship in the Humanities.  
<https://academic.oup.com/dsh/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/llc/fqab026/6242746#>
- Wright, David Thomas Henry and Chris Arnold. 2021. *The Perfect Democracy*.  
<https://theperfectdemocracy.com>.

## Funding

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 21K12944  
<https://kaken.nii.ac.jp/en/grant/KAKENHI-PROJECT-21K12944/>

**DAVID THOMAS HENRY WRIGHT**

David Thomas Henry Wright won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards' Digital Literature Prize, 2019 Robert Coover Award for a work of Electronic Literature (2nd prize), and 2021 Carmel Bird Digital Literary Award. He has been shortlisted for multiple other literary prizes, and published in various academic and creative journals. He is the recipient of a Queensland writing fellowship, an Australian Council for the Arts grant, and a JSPS Kakenhi grant. He has a PhD (comparative literature) from Murdoch University and a Masters (creative writing) from the University of Edinburgh, and taught creative writing at China's top university, Tsinghua. He is currently co-editor of The Digital Review, a narrative consultant for Stanford University's Smart Primer research project, and an associate professor at Nagoya University.

**ORCID**

[0000-0002-2525-9057](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2525-9057)

**Institutional address**

Nagoya University  
Furocho, Chikusa Ward, Nagoya, Aichi, Japan,  
464-8601

**CHRIS ARNOLD**

Chris Arnold writes software and poetry from Whadjuk Noongar country in Perth, Western Australia. With David Thomas Henry Wright, Chris won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards' Digital Literature Prize and placed 2nd in the 2019 Robert Coover Award. He was shortlisted for Australian Book Review's 2022 Peter Porter Poetry Prize, and he's completing a PhD in Creative Writing at The University of Western Australia.

**ORCID**

[0000-0002-1623-3496](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1623-3496)

**Institutional address**

University of Western Australia  
35 Stirling Hwy, Crawley WA 6009, Australia

**To cite this article**

Wright, David Thomas Henry, and Chris Arnold. 2023. "Beyond Maximalism: Resolving the Novelistic Incompatibilities of Realism, Paranoia, Omniscience, and Encyclopedism through Electronic Literature." *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens* (58): 79-96. <https://doi.org/10.34619/gthw-emhw>.

**Received** Recebido: 2022-12-30

**Accepted** Aceite: 2023-04-10

**DOI** <https://doi.org/10.34619/gthw-emhw>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>