



Ezerin, I 2022 'The Worst of Both Worlds: *The Familiar's* E-Books and Their Unhandy Limitations' *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 10(2): 4, pp. 1–21. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.8335>



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## The Worst of Both Worlds: *The Familiar's* E-Books and Their Unhandy Limitations

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The commercial longevity and actual continuity of Mark Z. Danielewski's series *The Familiar* was, by default, subject to the audience's enthusiasm about it. But the latter hinges on a number of factors, which include not only the appeal of the plot and the author's cult status, but also, importantly, the material conditions of the reading experience and the broader patterns of the economics of contemporary publishing industry. The argument of this essay considers the characteristics and effects of *The Familiar's* somewhat inglorious digital incarnation, to infer that the absence of a 'proper' (i.e. medium-specific) and functional (i.e. responsive to highlighting, annotations, word selection and search, translation, and other functions afforded by digital devices) e-book edition significantly factored into the causes of the "pause" in the series' progression, announced by the writer on February 2nd, 2018.

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Shortly after the release of *The Familiar* volume 3, Mark Z. Danielewski gave a talk at Google, on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016. At some point during the event, the writer was asked about the demand for e-book copies of the series, and in his response assured that “it [was] a small percentage of readers, who tackle *The Familiar* on an iPad” and that “people like the book”, therefore the digital availability did not appear critical (*Talks at Google*, 2016).

On a different occasion, at an event at Free Library of Philadelphia in February 2017, when confronted with the same topic, Danielewski did not directly respond on whether his publisher Pantheon ever tried to pressure him toward focusing more on the digital release of the series, and instead concentrated the response on the broader issue of the project’s continuation, saying that the publisher had been, obviously, aware from the start that the series’ future depended on readers as much as on the writer. “It has my energy, it has pretty much every day and hour of my life, it has my weariness, my discoveries, but it will also depend upon the vote of those people who believe in something larger, something that’s more complex, something that comes from a smaller machine” (*Author Events*, 2017).

In the same vein, during an interview with M.J. Franklin on *MashReads Podcast* in March 2017 (some weeks after the release of *The Familiar* volume 4), Danielewski maintained that the 27-part design was “still very much in place”, yet stressed again that in addition to the great deal of his personal commitment—“to start a project ten years ago and work on something that really does not have a place in culture”—the reader’s commitment was an equally vital factor, and hence if there were “not enough readers, it [would] be cancelled, probably” (Franklin, 2017).

Indeed, just like the format of the TV series that *The Familiar* sought to remediate, and just like any commercial serial project, the longevity of Danielewski’s series was, by default, subject to the audience’s enthusiasm about it. But the latter hinges on a number of factors, which include not only the appeal of the plot and the author’s cult status, but also, importantly, the material conditions of the reading experience and the broader patterns of the economics of contemporary publishing industry. The paratextual corpus surrounding *The Familiar* seems to reflect these contextual drivers of the reading habits and preferences, and perhaps may, in a way, explain the “pause” in the series’ progression, announced by the writer on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018.

In the following, I will adduce and look into the effects and causes of *The Familiar*’s somewhat inglorious digital incarnation, to infer that the absence of a ‘proper’ (i.e. medium-specific) and, more importantly, functional (i.e. responsive to highlighting, annotations, word selection and search, translation, and other functions afforded by

digital devices) e-book edition, most likely didn't help (to say the least) the publication of the series to progress beyond the fifth installment. I will consider the case against the backdrop of the reshaped economics of publishing industry and the changing dynamics of access to narrative entertainment amidst the culture of digital devices, and will discuss *The Familiar*'s printed edition's conflict with practicality as well as its digital edition's uncooperativeness with the reader's striving for close reading and diegetic detail monitoring.

What is particular and new about *The Familiar*, in contrast to the rest of Danielewski's work (both print and digital), is its unprecedented, "extravagant" demand on the reader's time and effort, attained by means and materialities of discursive complexity and serial form of narration/publication. Therefore, the argument of this essay is focused on the "whys" of the pause in the series' continuity, and on the hypothesis that the genesis of these reasons lies in the discrepancy between the series' demands and the readers' ability to tackle the former without the basic functionality of digital devices connected to distributed media networks.

For decades now, the cultural and especially the practical eminence of literature's 'traditional' carrier—the printed book—has been under pressure from the emerging digital alternatives with their constantly improving graphical user interfaces (GUIs). Although the fears that the codex would be completely superseded by an e-book and other forms of screen-bound text-rendering technologies have been allayed, at least to some extent, nevertheless the technologically induced developments in the realm of book publishing have visibly affected the industry's value chain and the public's approaches to reading.

The availability of alternative means of communication and the possibility of choice in contemporary media environment (boosted by the growing trend for personalized experience) have enabled and prompted readers to configure their access to literature according to individual preferences and environmental circumstances. While many bibliophiles remain loyal to the good old paperbacks and hardcovers, it probably won't be an overstatement to characterize the archetypal model of contemporary reader—who is pampered by the diversity of reading devices, among them, printed books, e-readers, smartphones, tablets, and laptops—as increasingly media-promiscuous. In commercial terms, this trend is among the principal drivers of the turn to omni-channel distribution in the publishing industry, which has normalized the availability of the same literary work in different material incarnations. Meanwhile, in cultural terms, this is a symptom of the metamorphosis of use values of narrativity in digitalized environments.

In his discussion of the latter, Jim Collins (2013) singles out the proliferation of e-readers and smart-tablet technologies (alongside serial world-building) amongst the most significant facilitators of change within the popular literary culture. Collins, whose specialty is “the culture of digital devices”, argues that in the age when almost any form of narrative entertainment is susceptible to digital remediation and rendering via pixels—“when texts become files, when the page becomes a screen, when the book becomes a portable multimedia library and at the same time a portal to reading communities” (641)—a reassessment of the changing use values of narrativity became inevitable.

While this line of discussion may sound more salient in the context of transmedially expanded story worlds and storylines, it is arguably incontrovertible that the wide adoption of portable digital devices<sup>1</sup>—which are simultaneously the means of storage and access, as well as the doorways into the world wide web—has also proven to be disruptive to the cultural and hedonic values of texts that, by convention or by intention, were originally circumscribed to the confines of the medium of printed page.

Although any book (regardless of its material incarnation) that exists in the contemporary techno-cultural environment is, as Joseph Tabbi (2002) once suggested, by default “linked up with a wider, distributed media network” (xi),<sup>2</sup> the presence of narrative artefacts on e-readers and smart electronic tablets puts them in a more direct relationship with dictionaries, encyclopedias, videos, apps, songs, messages, and other resources available via web browsing; all of which appear to have become increasingly relevant for the digitally literate reader. Borrowing a line from Jessica Pressman’s discussion of *House of Leaves*, it can be said that, in general, the nature of reception of narrative artefacts (and specifically of e-books) on portable digital devices reinforces the sense of hyperconnectivity and the idea that a book is “always a node in an ever-changing network of information [and] interaction” (2006: 120).

Under such conditions, e-books (along with other types of file formats and information/content packages) became an actor in the domain of *screen culture*, wherein different carriers of entertainment (and specifically, of narrative entertainment) and the accompanying sensory exercises of reading, watching, listening, and browsing interplay under the umbrella of the pleasures of “cultural *playlisting*” (Collins 2013: 654). The term *playlisting*, in this case, stands for the process of carving a personal

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<sup>1</sup> Apple Inc. alone sold a total of 500 million iPads in the decade of 2010’s (Peterson, 2020) and more recently experienced a record increase in sales during the Coronavirus Pandemic (Espósito, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> The inevitable connectedness to the “distributed media network” (Tabbi, 2002)—imposed, by default, on every cultural artefact in the digitized media ecologies—is, in essence, a more intensified form of multimedia intertextuality, as it implies a greater range of ways of interrelatedness for any cultural artefact.

identity to the measure of individual aesthetic and cultural preferences. This process has evolved into a behavioral imperative on the receiving end of the cultural industry, by virtue of the trend for hyper-personalization at the core of the digital devices' allure. As a result, for some segments of the modern digitally literate *perusers*,<sup>3</sup> the smart-tablets and e-readers have come to represent a technology of the self that fosters self-expression through curation of personal digital archives.

Aside from this symbolic function, the appeal of portable digital screens is also patently practical. The ergonomics of these devices and their ubiquity in the texture of human existence in contemporary developed societies encourage the recipients (especially the urban dwellers) to customize their means of access<sup>4</sup> to entertainment according to individual environmental circumstances and agendas. Thus, in sum, it is probably not rash to conclude that any author's or publisher's disregard of both the use value of portable digital devices (their ergonomics, multifunctionality, curatorial and navigational features) and their influence on the use values of narrativity may, among other effects, negatively reverberate through a literary work's commercial longevity or actual continuity (if the work is serialized).

Given the peculiarity of *The Familiar*'s formal arrangement (its narrative style, multimodality, formatting, and publication pattern), the reading experience that it engenders could hardly be a case in point of how the instances of popular serialized narratives are commonly experienced, and yet its sheer existence in the reality of digitally mediated communication does render it susceptible to the points of the preceding argument. In light of the new use values of narrativity in contemporary techno-cultural environment, the physical dimensions of *The Familiar*'s printed copies and the limitations of its e-book edition became an issue. First, one of the ironies of *The Familiar*'s bulky physicality<sup>5</sup> is that on the flipside of its undeniable appeal to the

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term *peruser*—a portmanteau of 'peruse + user'—to refer to the contemporary digitally literate reader, because this blend takes into account the two side of the experience of reading from screen.

<sup>4</sup> By "means of access", here, I don't only imply the materialities of 'repeated access' to narrative entertainment, that is, the reading, viewing, or listening technologies, but also the material conditions of the 'first-time access', that is, the conditions of purchase of entertainment artefacts, because the earlier-mentioned promiscuity of the recipients' approach to media also spills into the attitude toward the retail channels. Notably, in this regard, the digitalization of cultural and commercial infrastructures and the pervasiveness of digital devices have apparently enabled the acts of instant purchase (through download or stream) to become a part of the cultural norm for the textual and, especially, the video, audio, and ludic forms of entertainment.

<sup>5</sup> Each installment of *The Familiar* contained approximately 880 pages, bound in a 6.2 × 1.7 × 9.2 inches/16 × 23 × 4.3 cm codex, that weighed in at around 3.74 pounds/1.7 kilograms. Danielewski's attention to detail in his approach to the weight of installments led the writer "so far as to build phonebooks in order to experience what 880 pages feel like, and how thick or thin the paper should be so it's manageable." Also, symbolically, the writer saw the heaviness and the tactile communication of weight and size as "the counterweight" to the "tiny insubstantial cat", who is the element of the story world (Driscoll and van den Ven, 2018: 146).

readers' aesthetic sensibility, it also significantly makes demands on their athletic abilities. The installments were referred to by the readers as “weighty” and “very heavy” (Ferguson, 2017; *Author Events*, 2017), and even Danielewski himself admitted the strain of carrying *The Familiar Volume 4* all around the country during the promotional tour. “It’s heavy”, said the writer, “it constantly insists on its physicality, so before you have to let it go, you actually have to use your muscles to lug it around; it’s a manual labor, literally manual labor” (Kahan, 2017).

Considered specifically against the backdrop of life in contemporary urban settings, this aspect of the serial is arguably delicate, to say the least, because not only do urban and suburban residents tend to read more than their rural counterparts (thus representing, at least in theory, a bigger prospective audience), but also because, generally, urban readers in both formats (i.e. printed book and e-book) are more likely to prefer e-books for many reading activities.<sup>6</sup> In cities, the reading habits have been reconfigured more significantly by the broad shift in patterns of access to media and narrative entertainment, which diverged from the prevalence of home/household-bound routines and rituals, towards the multitasking-inspired customs of making the most of the schedule by listening, watching, or reading on the move. Notably, the daily commute has become a prime example of a go-to setting for the engagement with a chapter in a printed or an audio book, or with an episode of a podcast or a TV-show; and hence it is altogether understandable that a city dweller, who probably spends a considerable amount of time shuttling, would find it somewhat inconvenient to carry around the town a brick of *The Familiar's* printed copy, let alone more than one. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the voicing of demands for alternative electronic carriers of *The Familiar's* episodes came up at public readings, in the novel's Facebook Reading Group, and in the respective forum section on the MZD website.

While the readers who commented on the issue concurred in terms of their aesthetic appreciation of the paperbacks, they nevertheless coincided in the opinion that the physicality of the volumes was incompatible with the conditions of a typical daily urban routine, especially when the installments started steadily adding up. For instance, the user signed as ‘Dreebs Thornhill’ admitted owning both the print and the digital copies and stressed being “in love” with the former, yet nevertheless insisted that “the digital versions are pretty much a must for city commuters” (Lee, 2019). Indeed, the desire to switch, for the sake of convenience, to an e-book edition after having read the first

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<sup>6</sup> According to the reports “Reading Habits in Different Communities” (from December, 2012), “E-Reading Rises as Device Ownership Jumps” (from January, 2014), and “Book Reading 2016” (from September 2016) by a nonpartisan fact tank Pew Research Center.

volume or two in printed format is consequential. As pleasurable as the experience of reading the series from the impressive, printed copies could be, it was arguably far from viable to enjoy it consistently, because the conditions of life in contemporary urban settings are somewhat hostile to the perusal of *The Familiar* in its original printed form.

But beyond the conflict between the materiality of *The Familiar*'s printed edition and its readers' environmental circumstances and relatable inclination for practicality, there was perhaps a bigger issue stemming from the technical characteristics of the series' e-book version. Thanks to the writer's self-imposed "command" of not "want[ing] for something to be unavailable to others"<sup>7</sup> (Strand Book Store, 2017), the installments of the series have been within the reach of e-reader and smart-tablet users from the outset. However, the only available digital edition of *The Familiar* materialized as a PDF bundle of screenshots—essentially, pages behind the glass, without any sort of modifications—lacking multimedia or interactive additions, and locked away from searching, highlighting, text-selecting functions, and other possibilities for digital manipulation on the reader's side.<sup>8</sup> As the functionality was reduced to mere scrolling of pictures containing spreads of pages, the only advantage of such sealed, hermetic, image-only PDF e-books was that this was one of only a few universal digital packagings that both preserved the visual integrity of the original creation and was tolerated by most smart-tablet devices and their operating systems. While this agnostic nature of the image-only PDF's allows for *The Familiar*'s availability on most platforms, it also implies that the digital edition is the same and equally limited (in terms of functions and medium-specific qualities) regardless of whether it is accessed on an e-ink e-reader (e.g. the Amazon's Kindle) or on a high-definition screen tablet (such as Apple's iPad, Android-powered devices, or Amazon's Kindle Fire HDX), because the differences in underlying hardware (most notably, the display technology) and software (i.e. the operating system) don't alter the unresponsive essence of the series' snapshot-like digital incarnation.

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<sup>7</sup> This "command" is also the reason why Danielewski had considered exploring another medium—the audiobook. As the writer put it: "I have more and more friends who listen to audiobooks on the train, in a car, and so *The Familiar* is very suited for that because there's very specific voices, so you can actually move very easily between them" (Strand Book Store, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> According to ABBYY FineReader, PDF documents can be categorized into three different types, based on the method of the document's creation: (1) the so-called 'true' or 'digitally created PDFs'; (2) 'image-only' or 'scanned' PDFs, (3) and 'searchable' PDFs. Importantly, the method of original creation also determines "whether the content of the PDF (text, images, tables) can be accessed or whether it is 'locked' in an image of the page." In line with this classification, *The Familiar* e-books are 'image-only' or 'scanned' PDFs in which "the content is 'locked' in a snapshot-like image". More explicitly, such documents are comprised of "scanned/photographed images of pages, without an underlying text layer", hence they are not searchable, and their text cannot be modified or marked up. (ABBYY FineReader PDF n.d.).

Theoretically, there are several manners in which the discussion of *The Familiar* e-book could be undertaken. For instance, it could be discussed from the angle of transmedial/intermedial approaches in narratology, that is, as a comparative study across media (and their respective materialities) wherein the aesthetic experiences of reading the digital and the printed copies are weighed up against each other. On the other hand, the line of argument about *The Familiar*'s digital edition could develop against the backdrop of Danielewski's other e-books which, unlike the former, are medium-specific and take full advantage of the affordances and malleability of the digital medium. In other words, it could materialize as a comparative study within the boundaries of the same medium—the electronic—wherein *The Familiar*'s e-books are juxtaposed with the digital editions of *Only Revolutions* and *The Fifty Year Sword*.

The present argument, however, approaches *The Familiar*'s e-book as a piece in a larger structure that, in conjunction with the printed edition and online discussions, contributes to the holistic experience of the series. It is not considered here as a stand-alone entity—a derivative that became independent from the source artefact, like the instances of the digital editions of *Only Revolutions* and *The Fifty Year Sword*. Instead, *The Familiar*'s e-books are approached here for what they essentially are: a digital supplement, an additional, alternative point of entry into the series' story world.

The designations “e-book” and “digital edition” are formal nomenclature and do not, in themselves, grant *The Familiar*'s PDFs the same status as the medium-specific *Only Revolutions* and *The Fifty Year Sword*. The former, at the end of the day, is merely a PDF, deprived of those unique characteristics that render a digital book medium-specific and/or responsive to the basic functionality of digital devices. However, what is most important is not a certain kind of multimediality or interactivity that is missing from *The Familiar*'s e-books—such as, for instance, sounds, animations, feedback from the medium, and especially a simulation of the paper version—but really a failure to enable even the most basic functions of the electronic medium.

Therefore, the argument of this essay doesn't include any comparative considerations on the differences between *The Familiar*'s e-books and the digitally medium-specific *Only Revolutions* or *The Fifty Year Sword*. It is not crucial to consider that, for instance, the material evolution of *Only Revolutions* shows Danielewski's road novel moving from the printed configuration where the separate narrative threads of two protagonists started on the opposite sides of the codex to the digital incarnation where narrative threads were aligned side-by-side and became endowed with extra accoutrements, such as road signs and sound effects. It is also beyond the scope of this essay's concerns to hypothesize on what a full-fledged medium-specific *The Familiar* e-book could possibly look like, or what the aesthetic and



commercial effects would have been if *The Familiar*'s digital edition were akin to the medium-specific e-books of *Only Revolutions* and of *The Fifty Year Sword*. Instead, the focus is on the limitations of the embodiment as an 'image-only/scanned' PDF that restricted this digital alternative from cooperating with the reader in tackling the discursive complexities that, arguably, could only be tackled with the help of digital means.

Danielewski's devoted followers are notably scrupulous,<sup>9</sup> and there was no shortage of comments and complaints within the series' online reading community regarding the shortcomings of the e-book. Notably, as evinced by the remarks, the relative unwieldiness or impracticality of the printed edition in conjunction with the absence of a functional electronic alternative were, among other effects, undermining the ability to close-read the series and keep track of its diegetic details.

When the project progressed into further volumes, the story world grew larger and the narrative threads became more entangled, the burden of the printed edition's materiality grew and the urge for the digital means of quick search and cross-referencing of the narrative's new stages with prior developments became more pressing. In this regard, for instance, a member of the *TF* Facebook Reading Group identified as 'Jackie Galerne', who "read mostly on the train and [couldn't] carry all five volumes around every day",<sup>10</sup> wrote that they expected *The Familiar* e-books to be fit for the quick retrieval of information from different volumes, but only after purchasing the digital editions did they realize that the digital files were not searchable nor allowing to take notes, which was "annoying" (Galerne, 2019).

The questions around navigation and keeping track of the unfolding diegesis are not unique to *The Familiar* but rather universal among serialized narratives and across different materialities. Prior to the breakthrough of portable digital devices, it was VCR recordings and DVD box sets, as well as the bound compilations of novels serialized in printed periodicals that enabled recipients to navigate, cross-reference, and close read. In 2015, Jason Mittell, a prominent scholar of serial television, highlighted that the possibility "to shelve" television series by means of DVD box-sets or downloaded files was not only helping "raise the cultural value of television programming" and surround it with additional paratextual framing, but, perhaps more importantly, allowed for the

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<sup>9</sup> The online discussions in boards and forums, and, more recently, social media groups have been, or become, an intrinsic part of the 'MZD experience' since *House of Leaves*, and the quality of these discussions has been lauded by Danielewski and scholars alike (such as, for instance, Jessica Pressman (2006) or Bronwen Thomas (2011)). Considering *The Familiar*'s serial nature, the significance of the feedback from the active online community of readers is even greater than in the cases of the writer's previous works.

<sup>10</sup> The combined weight of all five volumes of *The Familiar*'s first season would amount to 18.7 pounds or 8.5 kilograms.

“flexibility and control [...] to consult and replay moments from episodes or seasons past”, thus facilitating close reading (57).

While *The Familiar*, thanks to its author’s status, does not *a priori* require cultural validation, its complexity renders the cataloguing on (ideally) a digital shelf highly desirable for anyone aiming at a more nuanced experience of serial continuity. However, such “shelving” is of little avail when the stored e-book isn’t adequately formatted and when its unhandy limitations mute the e-readers’ and smart-tablets’ navigational and curatorial functionality.

At a presentation of *The Familiar* Volume 5 at Strand Book Store in New York on November 10<sup>th</sup> 2017, Danielewski was asked about his perspective on the readers’ ability to preserve vivid recollections of diegetic details from early installments and to interrelate the future cultural moments with those from the diegetic setting, when the series would have reached the ends of distant seasons. Although the projected publication pace would have deferred the project’s overall conclusion until around 2030, Danielewski didn’t voice any concerns about the reader’s ability to keep up with the serialized plot, saying that the reader “is forgetting already” in the sheer process of reading, and what ultimately matters is that “the experience will be in that moment [of reading]” (Strand Book Store, 2017). On a different occasion, Danielewski addressed the topic of narrative linearity and navigation through the plot by emphasizing that “volume 1 starts in the middle of things anyway, and we live in the middle of things”, and therefore the reader of *The Familiar*, especially the first-time reader, should “dive” into the story world “like in a river” wherever they please. Given that, as the writer pointed out, the rather disorienting Volume 1— “very much like *The Wire*”—drops the reader in the middle of the characters’ lives “without a lot of process”, the concerns about the chronological order and dramatic structure of the plot must be of secondary order. Thus, “just jump[ing] in the middle” is what Danielewski insisted on (Franklin, 2017). On yet another occasion, Danielewski similarly suggested that “all of the volumes could be read independently of one another and enjoyed for what they offer”, and referring to his interactions with readers while on tour and to the notes of what people quote from the book, the writer claimed that the readers of *The Familiar* “find meanings in the book that aren’t necessarily tied directly to the narrative.” (Driscoll and van den Ven, 2018: 157).

While the implications of the restrained nature of *The Familiar*’s e-book transpired at many different levels, interestingly, not all the comments regarding the series’ digital edition were totally marked by a tone of grievance. Some contributions to the discussion board tagged ‘The Familiar eBooks’ on Danielewski’s website evince that certain *perusers* were able to get more from interaction with the electronic installments

of the series than others. For example, a user identified as ‘Ellimist’ extolled the “vibrant” appearance of *The Familiar* Volume 1 on the screen of a full-color tablet Kindle HDX. The drawback of the text not being “selectable” on the virtual pages, apparently, did not weigh as much for this reader as the advantage of the tablet being “much lighter than a paper book.” However, as concerns the appearance of Volume 1 on the Amazon’s six-inch e-ink device, ‘Ellimist’ lamented that in contrast to the smoothness of high-resolution files on Kindle HDX the former was “close to unreadable” (Ellimist, 2015).

Another participant in the discussion, identified as ‘Johnny Truant’, praised the possibility to lock the Google Play version of *The Familiar* Volume 1 on an Android-powered tablet “in portrait mode and rotate the pages”, which made the reading experience of *signiconic*<sup>11</sup> passages more practical, as tablet “is significantly lighter than the print version” (Truant, 2015a).

The possibility to rotate a device at will, in pursuit of the perfect angle of a page and its contents, and the possibility to zoom in and zoom out on the pages in order to discern the fuzzy and minuscule textual and pictorial elements was also invoked in a more recent comment (that didn’t receive any feedback from the reading community) by a member of the *TF* reading group on Facebook, signed as Paul Radke. The reader inquired if it was possible in the electronic version “to enhance the ‘rawrgirl’ phone screen chat bubbles (on pages 178–179 [in *TFv2*]) to see the tiny unreadable (in the book) bubbles”, and whether “anybody managed another way of reading them?” (Radke, 2019, emphasis added).

*The Familiar* is replete with the occurrences of purposefully imprecise renderings of textual, *signiconic*, and other graphic configurations, and arguably it is more likely that the contemporary reader will intuitively search for an electronic edition on a high-resolution smart screen device rather than reach for a magnifying glass to zoom in on the printed page in order to discern the minuscule and indistinct elements. This is not only because of the cultural shift in reading habits prompted by digitality, but also because technically the acts of zooming in on electronic devices are more advantageous, as they allow for a greater maximum zoom factor and freezing of the zoomed-in section.

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<sup>11</sup> The term ‘signiconic’ (a blend of ‘sign’ + ‘icon’), in the arsenal of Danielewski’s aesthetics, refers to the category of graphic arrangements that combine textual and pictorial elements. Typically, Danielewski’s signiconic configurations involve the ingenious deployment of alphabetic characters, typographical symbols, and punctuation marks, on the codex’s spreads, in a manner that explores/stretches the book’s layout conventions and challenges (as well as confounds) the modularity of human cognition by blurring (or at least narrowing) the conventional chasm between the linguistic and the pictorial. In Danielewski’s own words, “Rather than engage those textual faculties of the mind remediating the pictorial or those visual faculties remediating language, the ‘signiconic’ simultaneously engages both in order to lessen the significance of both, and therefore achieve a third perception no longer dependent on sign and image for remediating a world in which the mind plays no part.” (Danielewski, n.d.)

Some other MZD forum members, who admittedly had to activate their resourcefulness and digital skills to full extent, claimed being able to apply the text selection, translation, and search features in the Google Play editions of *The Familiar* Volume 1 through Firefox and Chrome browsers for desktop and mobile devices.<sup>12</sup> However, according to the user ‘Aquarius’, all these features were only functional with the “normal” (horizontally positioned) text, and, as the user named ‘Heartbreak’ complained, “alas, it couldn’t translate the Arabic, Chinese, or the Greek” (Aquarius, 2015 and Heartbreak, 2015).<sup>13</sup>

The topic of linguistic translation mentioned by Aquarius is another potent reason why *The Familiar*’s discursive configuration renders the responsiveness/functionality of the digital edition rather indispensable. The series is linguistically highly diverse, featuring, besides English, the utterances in vernaculars and dialects of Spanish, Arabic, Mandarin and Cantonese, Armenian, Turkish, and the occasional sprinkles of Japanese, Russian, Latin, and Hebrew. In more detail, the series offers examples of what the editors behind the website ‘[tvtropes.org](http://tvtropes.org)’ call “bilingual bonus” (Literature/ *The Familiar*, n.d.), because most of the characters use more than a single language in their respective narrative threads. Moreover, Danielewski further complicated the linguistic dimension of the series by resorting to the articulations as specific as Singlish (more on this later), Egyptian Arabic, rural Mexican Spanish, and the slang-heavy, urban Californian Spanglish (a pidgin of Spanish and American English). Such linguistic diversity, in itself, might not have been a cause of raised brows in the presence of explicative annotations, but in *The Familiar* it became an issue and a cause of frustration for some of the readers because most (if not all) of the non-English speech in the narrative is not translated.<sup>14</sup>

Among others, the storyline focusing on recovering addict Jingjing (signaled by the blue ‘dog ear’ markers in the printed volumes) was arguably the one that presented the greatest challenge to many readers. This perplexing narrative thread is written in the Singaporean Singlish creole that uses the Latin alphabet—a blend of English and different languages spoken in Singapore, including Hokkien, Malay, Teochew,

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<sup>12</sup> An attempt to replicate the experience with *The Familiar*’s Google Play editions in Chrome browser didn’t work out.

<sup>13</sup> The public discussions of alternatives to the printed edition also touched upon the availability of ‘audio editions’ of *The Familiar*. Two separate boards regarding this topic were initiated on Facebook and Reddit.

<sup>14</sup> Taking into consideration Danielewski’s concept of signiconic, it also seems tenable to imagine that by leaving the foreign, the un-*familiar* scripts untranslated, the writer reduced (or elevated) them to the ‘signiconic’ status and, hence, left it at the discretion of the reader’s cognition to choose whether to approach those strings of characters as linguistic or as pictorial elements, or as both. In other words, Danielewski reduced the primacy of the lexical, and thus equiposed its powers with the powers of the script’s visual dimension, so that the textual faculties of the mind remediating the pictorial and the visual faculties remediating language are simultaneously engaged.

Cantonese and Tamil—intermingled with the frequent interjections written in Chinese Mandarin and Japanese logograms, and even in Cyrillic Russian characters.

In light of this linguistic extravagance, it is hardly surprising that the discourse of Jingjing’s storyline gave rise to a number of grumbling comments. For instance, a reader identified as Alex Sorondo, in the *TF Reading Group* on Facebook, found the chapters of Jingjing’s thread “really intimidating”, and even had to “put [Volume 1] down for several months on account of how frustrating it was” to read them (Sorondo, 2017). Another reader, Seth Cadman, said that his “brain [was] hurting” while trying to read Jingjing’s chapters, and added that he “[didn’t] have time to try and find translations” (Cadman, 2019). A user signed as Caryl Owen, who suggested a character-by-character re-reading of the series, highlighted “how frustrating going in and out of the Jingjing chapters can be”, and suggested “that maybe it would be easier to follow his language, thoughts, and story by going in for total immersion” (Owen, 2021).

For some readers, the challenges posed by the linguistic complexity of Jingjing’s chapters were not even worth the effort. For example, a reviewer of *The Familiar* Volume 3 (*Honeysuckle & Pain*) on [Goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com), signed as Sean Rabun, gave the installment an “it was amazing” rating, yet in the commentary section wrote that “he still [kept] skipping Jingjing” (Rabun, 2016). In another review of the first volume in the Summer 2015 issue of *The Worcester Journal*, Jeremy Levine argued that “the first part of *The Familiar* [was] fighting an uphill battle in terms of getting its readers to commit to various storylines”, because, as he saw it, some of these were “very hard to follow because of their broken English”, and hence “the temptation to skip passages [was] hard to resist” (Levine, 2015).

Also, ironically, in the fourth chapter of *The Familiar* Volume 1 (the inaugural chapter of Jingjing’s narrative thread), on page 104, after the very first occurrence of a string of non-alphabetic (non-Latin) script—in this case, Chinese Mandarin logograms—in Jingjing’s discourse and in the series overall, there is an in-line comment by Narcon 9 that says: “Really? Not your Google bitch” (Danielewski, 2015: 104). Later in the same chapter, in Jingjing’s account of his interaction with Zhong, the former says “like jingjing some google bitch, he translate for zhong”; and the phrase is followed by a string of logograms (Danielewski, 2015: 112). Given the somewhat ambiguous role and nature of the Narcons in *The Familiar*’s diegetic universe, the wider significance and implications of the interjection are subjective, as evince the hermeneutical takes on the matter, posted in the discussion thread initiated in the *TF Reading Group* on Facebook by Tim Larsson, where the members speculated on whether “the Narcon comments/annotates from the future, playing at what Jingjing is going to say [...] or [whether] Jingjing somehow ‘hear[s]’ the Narcon’s comment, and uses that expression because

of that?” (Larsson, 2017). However, the salient point is that most, if not all readers probably expected to see a translation somewhere in the brackets or in a footnote, and hence, in the absence of such, the Narcon’s interjection, at least on the surface, seems like a teasing remark, a provocation of the reader, or as the user Scott Worley pointed out, “just the Narcon being cheeky” (Worley, 2017). In another discussion of the Narcon’s utterance in the ‘Forums’ section on the MZD website, the user ‘TBHalo’ commented that he thought the Narcon wanted to tell him “Come on I don’t want to translate all of this” (TBHalo, 2015), and the user ‘Johnny Truant’ added that the Narcon’s interjection of “not your Google bitch” actually made him close the book, “curse at it and not pick it up again for a few months” (Truant, 2015b).

Aside from the profusion of undefined non-English speech, the pages of *The Familiar* are also crowded with a plethora of occurrences of C++ computational source code, urban slang, technical jargon, and a variety of historical, academic, philosophical, and cultural references, as well as specific references to real-life local events such as the San Francisco Zoo tiger attack (Danielewski, 2016: 802).

It is plausible to argue that, for most of the readers who aren’t familiar with such references, the latter would be either explained through ‘googling’ or would likely remain just a part of the fiction or, worse, simply meaningless. At present, in digitally advanced societies, it is hard to imagine a reader (from whichever generation) whose immediate source of insight about definitions and explanations would not be the Internet or some other resource on the internal storage of some sort of portable electronic device.

In a discussion thread that invited the readers to comment on whether “anyone else [felt] somewhat disappointed by *The Familiar*”, a member of the *TF* Facebook Reading Group, signed as ‘Rich Kaminski’, highlighted as the reason for their disappointment the impression that “the volumes are hinging too much on external effort to make sense of and appreciate fully” (Kaminski, 2017). Comparing the reading of *The Familiar* to the experience of Danielewski’s previous works (which also required the reader’s investigative endeavors and prompted the reliance on collective intelligence, i.e. reading groups and discussion boards), Kaminski argued that for the former, “the research [felt] so integral to the experience that the plotlines themselves [were] little more than random events with a multitude of breadcrumbs leading to extensive and mandatory research that is needed to even reach that baseline level of analysis and satisfaction” (Kaminski, 2017). In an extensive expression of his grievance, the reader remembered the comments of some of the peers in the reading community, who “don’t bring [*The Familiar*] with them to read on their commute because they find themselves needing to have the internet around so they can google things that they have questions about”;

and concluded that he “cannot shake the feeling that if [*The Familiar*] can seemingly ONLY exist in that reality [that is, the reality of internet and Google searches] in order to be fully meaningful, then it is not succeeding as a novel—or at least not doing what the best novels do” (Kaminski, 2017).

Indeed, quite inevitably, as “bright, ambitious, inspiring, inquisitive, compassionate, rare, energetic, involved, brave, funny too, and most of all beautifully aware” (Danielewski, 2018) as the series’ readership appeared in Danielewski’s eyes, not everyone was thrilled about the abundance of the unfamiliar in *The Familiar*, and beyond a shadow of a doubt, only a handful of readers possessed the necessary linguistic skills and cultural knowledge to be at ease with the variety of articulations and references or to tackle these without the recourse to external, and specifically digital, sources of information.

While the readers who seek close-reading and want their experience of the series to be nuanced can, to a certain extent, assuage their desire for the greater detail by going back and forth between the volumes to keep the recollections of every development alive, there is still plenty of information in the series that just cannot be elucidated without an external source of insight, and arguably without an Internet connection. In the case of Singlish, for instance, it is not hard to imagine that probably only a handful of institutions and private individuals around the world own a dictionary of the language. In the case of slang and jargon, a copy of not the most up-to-date *Oxford English Dictionary* would probably be useless. In the cases of the local real-life events, only the Internet provides access to archives of newspapers that might have covered them. In the situations involving non-English utterances and non-Latin alphabets, those who are not fluent in, for instance, Arabic or Chinese scripts must wonder how to deal with them on a very basic level. For someone who is not able to single out the characters, syllables, and units of meaning in a foreign script, apparently there remains only the criterion of visual resemblance to rely on in order to identify the entry for an unknown string of characters in a dictionary. But even for someone who isn’t conservatively or idealistically fixed on the purely analogue experience and is willing to resort to the digital means for the answers, how does such reader even type a string of characters into the browser’s search bar?

These questions surrounding the challenges of undefined pieces of information in *The Familiar* bring to the fore the importance of the e-books’ responsiveness to the functionality of smart screen devices. In most of the situations mentioned above, and especially in the cases of foreign languages and scripts, the haptic selection of text, and the ensuing operations of search, translation, and annotation are arguably the most important features. If *The Familiar*’s e-book version were ‘functional’, the user would

have been able to simply select the desired sequence of characters by pressing a finger over the screen and translate it or search for additional information on the Internet (by choosing a version of the ‘Look Up’ function). In the case of Kindle devices, for instance, the operating system offers three options—Dictionary, Translation, and Wikipedia—in a pop-up widget, when a word or a string of characters is selected on a page of a responsive/functional e-book. Therefore, it is not surprising that without the haptic text selection and, hence, without the possibility to apply the digital devices’ functions and consult what the electronic databases hold for a given string of characters, certain parts of *The Familiar* became unreadable for some readers.

It is, thus, can be argued that Danielewski’s understanding of the readers’ capacity to acclimate to the series’ challenges was, perhaps, overly optimistic in relation to how high he had set the bar of complexity. While it is relatively unproblematic to concur that the readers’ gravitation to the printed copies of his standalone works (i.e. *House of Leaves*, *Only Revolutions*) is prompted both because and, sometimes, in spite of their ‘bookish’ (Pressman, 2009) extravagance, the same idea sounds less persuasive when the discursive and structural challenges are serially aggregating. Although it is tempting to accept Danielewski’s suggestion that the aesthetic experience of the moment of reading, however puzzling and disorienting it might be, should prevail, thus rendering somewhat insignificant the shortcomings of the series’ digital materialization; the grievances of some of the series’ followers, evince that the serial accumulation of unanswered discursive intricacies undermined the overall experience of the narrative and perhaps even jostled away those bookish pleasures that had become familiar to Danielewski’s avid followers from the series’ printed edition and from the writer’s previous works.

On a couple of occasions, Danielewski admitted to being aware of “all sorts of problems with the Kindle format” and lamented that “the technology itself is not quite as agile” as he would like it to be, because if the pages of *The Familiar* were mechanically funneled, converted to the standard file format of a specific platform or ecosystem (such as, ‘.azw’ for Kindle and other Amazon’s Fire OS devices, or ‘epub’ for iPads and Apple’s iOS-powered devices) in a way that would accommodate the functionality of that platform and of the supporting device, then all the visual information would have been “wiped out, it would all be one font, and typesetting would not matter”<sup>15</sup> (Talks at Google, 2016, and Ferguson, 2017).

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<sup>15</sup> At the most basic level, any owner of a Kindle e-reader or high-resolution tablet can experiment with these limitations by sending a textual document to the device and see how the Amazon’s platform converts the content to fit the representational conventions and functionality of the operating system (Fire OS). While the Amazon’s conversion for Kindle mostly respects the integrity of pictorial elements in the uploaded file, it nevertheless reduces most other types of contents to plain text and adjusts the original typesetting and page layout to the standard requirements of the device



Metaphorically speaking, both the image-only PDF e-books and the standard file formats of operating systems are two sorts of Procrustean bed that submit the digital rendering of an original print creation to conformity. While the one-size-fits-all nature of the former aims at preserving the visual information in expense of functional malleability, the latter upends the order and deprives the work of its individuality by optimizing the digital conversion to the functionality of the hosting platform/technology. Thus, considering that the textual and the visual are essentially inseparable in the multimodal aesthetics of *The Familiar* and in the entire corpus of Danielewski's work, the writer's preference for the image-only PDF over the standard-bound conversion appears completely coherent.

In addition to this, given the monumental nature of *The Familiar* and the time and effort it must have been taking to produce the series for print, the fact that Danielewski and his Atelier Z didn't launch any "enhanced" or "interactive"<sup>16,17</sup> electronic edition in parallel with the release of physical copies is perhaps self-explanatory. Moreover, Danielewski's views of the digital devices as accomplices of readers (Driscoll and van den Ven, 2018: 153), his previous experience in e-book making, and the fact that the role of digital technologies is tangible in *The Familiar* (both as a theme and an instrument of the series' creation) corroborate the writer's openness to digital remediation (including in regards to the conception of alternatives to printed codex) and, therefore, sustain a hypothesis that the image-only nature of *The Familiar's* PDF e-book is more likely a product of circumstances and limitations of current platforms, rather than of the writer's intent to restrain his readers by limiting the functional affordances that could steer them away from the flow of the narrative and away from the effortful modes of reading.

But while the presumed reasons behind *The Familiar's* PDF incarnation certainly don't deplete here, and not only technological but also economic factors undoubtedly played a part, the effects and implications of the digital edition's limitations seem to be much more numerous than the causes that led to it, because its image-only format

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and its operating system. As stated on the webpage titled "Send to Kindle by E-mail", on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), "PDFs can be converted to the Kindle format so you can take advantage of functionality such as variable font size, annotations, and Whispersync." While for most textual files, a slight change in the font size can be a matter of convenience, in the case of *The Familiar*, any manipulation of this sort could have dramatically affected the semiosis of Danielewski's textual arrangements (Send Documents to your Kindle as an Email Attachment, n.d.).

<sup>16</sup> More on the Danielewski's track record already includes an "enhanced" e-book version of the novella *The Fifty Year Sword* and an "interactive" digital edition of the road novel *Only Revolutions*. After the 2010 adaptation as a stage performance, the former was launched digitally in 2012, and *The Fifty Year Sword*, came out in the materiality of electronic bits in 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Danielewski's design and production studio Atelier Z, which began with the stage performance of *The Fifty Year Sword* (a three-year long production that involved actors and musicians) in 2010, includes translators, coders, and graphic designers.

combines the worst of both worlds (digital and printed) by removing the tactile pleasures of the printed edition's physicality while keeping the text isolated/disconnected from the databases/online sources of insight.

Perhaps the most significant implication of this limited nature of the digital edition is that it undoubtedly factored into the reasons why the bookshelves haven't seen *The Familiar* Volume 6 and the ensuing ones. If, as Hayles (2010) pointed out, "young people, who vote with their feet in college, are still marching in another direction—the digital direction" (65), they are increasingly marching in the same direction when they approach narrative entertainment. Thus, considering *The Familiar*'s extraordinary demands, in a time when, as per the Pew Research Center's reports, the number of Americans who read books on tablet computers has increased nearly fourfold, while the share who read books on smartphones has more than doubled, when 8% percent of the US adults read exclusively from e-reader devices, and 29% say they read both print and digital books, when the highly educated college graduates (arguably, Danielewski's target audience) are roughly four times as likely to read e-books compared with those who have not graduated high school, the quality of the series' digital edition was something to reckon with.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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