Bite-sizing digital literature in the twenty-first century <heading level 1>

(Revised May 2023)

> The long dream of representation has been to somehow package reality tidily, in discrete portions small enough to be embraced or consumed. The long dream of representation has been to somehow parse existence and consciousness and knowledge and segment it into bite-sized chunks.—Jane Yellowlees Douglas (65)

This article examines how the segmenting of literary portioning into 'bite-sized chunks' on digital platforms is adapting literature in the twenty-first century. It focuses not only on how digital bite-sizing adapts literature to new technologies, economic models, and modes of production and consumption but also how it adapts discourses of literary time and space and metaphors of literature as food. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of *bite-size*, 'small enough to be eaten at one bite; also *fig*.' (*OED*), encapsulates both the ways in which bite-size digital literature compresses literary time and space and the term's metaphorical representation of literary consumption as eating 'food': to be *bite-size* is to be small enough in *space* to be consumed in one brief, *temporal* bite.

Beyond the *OED*'s definition, bite-sizing *digital* literature forges a homonym, as bite-sizing in the sense of portioning attaches to byte-sizing in the sense of digitizing. Digital literary discourses often play on 'bite'/'byte', as in 'Poetry Bytes' (Academy of American Poets; also an unrelated *Instagram* page), the website *bytestories* (where stories are limited to 1500 characters), the Hindi language *Facebook* page 'One Byte Stories', and the article 'Byte-sized Stories: Twittering a Tiny Tale' (Paul). Disappointingly, the homonym offers little actual semantic play, as the terms are etymologically homogenous. In computing, a *byte* is the smallest unit of meaningful representation (such as an alphanumeric character),

comprised of eight 'bits', a *bit* being the smallest unit of digital storage. *Bit* is an alphanumeric compression of *binary digit*; binary is the smallest number system with only two digits (0, 1). John Tukey coined the word *bit* in computing (Raymond 67-8); its etymology derives from the Old English *bite* ('biting; what one bites'—*OED*). Werner Buchholtz coined the word *byte*, mutating its spelling to avoid confusion with *bit* (Raymond 99). Reinforcing the gustatory connotations of the word, in computing terminology, half a 'byte is a "nybble" by analogy with bite' (Raymond 333).

By contrast to such precise digital measurements, literature nominated bite-sized spans a considerable range from six-word stories (the website *Six Word Stories*), 140-character 'twitterature' (Paul), and the single-line poems of *Bite-Sized Poetry* (kevinjresureccion) to *Bitesized Audio Classics*, whose recordings often last several hours. (*A Christmas Carol*, at 30,762 words, runs for 3.5 hours.) The focus of this article lies not on what literary length *should be* nominated 'bite-sized' but on how and why twenty-first-century digital literature *has been* called bite-sized. Its central finding is a paradox: byte-sizing and bite-sizing alike compress the time and space of literary production to expand literary consumption; together, they do so exponentially.

Bite-sizing literary time and space <heading level 2>

The time-space compression of digital search engines means that my subject matter lies beyond the time and space of my lifetime to address. Google exact term searches for 'b(y/i)te-size(d)' stories, fiction, and poetry generate thousands of results in tenths of a second, spanning vast expanses of web pages; inexact term searches deliver millions in just hundredths of a second more (see Table 1). This research can make only a small start, further constrained by my language and field of research. The research underpinning this article

encompasses many more platforms than I can address; article word count limits also limit the amount I can cover.

Byte-sizing (digitizing) literature <heading level 3>

The first side of the byte/bite-sizing homonym concerns the digitization of literature, which has digitally compressed it in ways that have expanded both its production and consumption. These dynamics are well established. Digital compression has increased global access to literature and literacy (Elliott 2020, 53). Digital compression of literary texts has expanded access to books as byte-sizing compresses millions of words and thousands of books into the tiny spaces of hand-held portable devices. The first mass-produced e-reader, Amazon *Kindle*, was released in 2007. By 2022, a single 32GB *Kindle* device could hold 9000-13500 e-books (BookSummaryClub); in 2023, the app 'puts over 1.5 million books at your fingertips' (Google Play Store, '*Kindle*'). What is a physical impossibility with print literature has become tangible digital reality. Digitization, then, turns the antonymic relationship between *compression* ('forcing into a smaller compass'—*OED* 1.a) and *expansion* ('spreading out or unfolding' into a larger one —*OED* 1.a), into a paradoxical one that becomes doubly paradoxical when it is rendered logical through cause-and-effect explanations: it is precisely the compression of literature's physical space that allows for its expansive consumption.

Also released in 2007, Apple's first smartphone contained *iBooks*, an app simulating books, bookshelves, bookstores, and libraries. Relocating bookstores and libraries inside the pockets of readers, digitization 'revers[ed] relations between persons and spaces, outside and inside, texts and contexts' (Elliott 2020, 48). It has also compressed the time spent and space traversed to access literature. Today, *iBooks* expands access to reading, offering users 'millions of books and audiobooks from every category' and compresses the time spent to

access books: the app renders them 'all ready to instantly download and enjoy' (App Store, '*iBooks*').

Marxist geographer David Harvey explicates 'time-space compression' in the arts as a response to transportation and communication technologies that shrank space by compressing the time required to traverse it: 'space appears to shrink to a "global village" of telecommunications … time horizons shorten to the point where the present is all there is' (240). For Harvey, time-space compression is driven by capitalism's pursuit of ever-increasing profits: compressing the time taken to transport goods increases their rate of consumption while decreasing the time taken to generate profit. Harvey propounded his theory of time-space compression after the invention of the Internet in 1983 and prior to the launch of the World Wide Web in 1993 (Gillies and Cailliau). Twenty-first-century digital technologies have exacerbated time-space compression beyond anything he or anyone could have envisioned.

But literary bite-sizing is not entirely explained by economics and discourses of how digitization affects literary time and space are not limited to production and consumption. There are discourses of time and space that are particular to literature and other storytelling arts. Twenty-first-century literary apps tout the temporospatial ubiquity of their proffered consumption, as do apps offering many kinds of content, as in 'Anytime, Anywhere Bite-Sized Fiction' (*Radish*, 'About'). But literary apps also tap into a longstanding rhetoric of narrative transport that relocates readers inside story worlds. HK's *iReader*, boasting 600 million readers worldwide, touts its temporospatial ubiquity and expansive catalogue when it offers the whole 'World in My Pocket'. The illustration accompanying the caption depicts an astronaut-garbed reader drifting in outer space, eyes on a tiny hand-held smartphone as planets and planet-sized books float by (Google Play Store, *HK iReader*). Together, the rhetoric of digitization and narrative transport compresses readers and users into the tiniest of

digital spaces: *inside* compressed stories contained *inside* compressed software applications *inside* compressed hardware *inside* a tiny smartphone paradoxically at the same time that it releases readers into a universe of fictional spaces. The *Yonder* bite-sized fiction app, launched by WEBTOON in 2022, invites users to enter 'A universe of ongoing stories and worlds you can get lost in' (Google Play, *Yonder*). In so doing, it engages the rhetoric of Transportation Theory: 'Narrative transportation is the feeling of being lost in the world of a narrative, of being completely immersed in a story and leaving the real world behind' (Green 87). But *Yonder* does more than draw on that rhetoric: it conjoins the time-space shifts of narrative transportation to the mobility of digital devices and the temporospatial ubiquity of access to digital books they provide: 'Stories you can escape into. Whenever, wherever'; 'Stories that transport you. At home. On the move' (*Yonder*). In these phrases, readers simultaneously escape their physical spaces through entering imaginative story worlds even as they move through physical spaces whilst reading. The very name of the app, *Yonder* ('beyond'; 'over there'), evokes constant temporospatial dislocation.

Bite-sizing digital literary portions <heading level 3>

The remainder and majority of this article address the second side of the byte/bite-sizing homonym: bite-sizing in the sense of *portioning* digital literary content. Beyond a shared temporospatial dynamic in which bite-sizing compresses literary portions to expand literary consumption, there is considerable variety in the types of literature bite-sized, the types of bite-sizing applied, who produces and consumes bite-sized literature and why, the platforms and business models driving bite-sizing, and in the metaphors of food engaged. One bite-size does not fit all, we will see. But all seek to adapt literature to twenty-first-century digital platforms and their users.

Bite-sizing has been levied on both previously published and newly written literature on these platforms. Bite-sizing previously published literature typically involves serializing long literary works in small portions; new writing may be serialized or bite-sized in toto. Bite-sized literature has been delivered by email and accessed via apps; it has been posted on dedicated literary websites and on general social media platforms. It has been variably funded by authors, author collectives, publishers, and performers; by government and charitable grants; by internet and media conglomerates; by advertising; and by reader subscriptions and micropayments. Despite these and other variations, bite-sizing has always compressed literature with a view to producing some kind of expansion, as the following sections detail.

Bite-sizing previously published literature <heading level 4>

A year prior to the launch of *Kindle* and *iBooks*, Random House publisher Susan Danziger founded *DailyLit* to deliver 'very short instalments' of very long books via email or RSS feed at times and frequencies determined by subscribers. In 2009: 'every instalment is under five minutes – more like two to three minutes' (Polanka). 'The initial idea behind *DailyLit* was to integrate 'quality reading into people's busy, daily lives—through "byte-sized ebooks"' (*Crunchbase*). Danziger explains:

> We got the idea for *DailyLit* after the *New York Times* serialized a few classic works in special supplements a few summers ago. We wound up reading books that we had always meant to simply by virtue of making them part of our daily routine of reading the newspaper. The only thing we do more consistently than read the paper is read email. Bingo! (*DailyLit*, 'About')

Bite-sizing here adapts to the busy schedules of people who desire to read longer works but cannot do so in one sitting by injecting literature into daily emails in work contexts where people are obliged to read emails. The site suggests reading these emails during work breaks, whilst commuting or waiting; subscribers adapt their timing and frequency to suit their schedules.

Canonical nineteenth-century literature featured prominently in *DailyLit* in part because of its cultural cache and in part because its public domain status allowed Danziger to offer free content to attract subscribers: 'We put together a first version and began reading "War of the Worlds" and "Pride and Prejudice"' (*DailyLit*, 'About'). By 2009, Danziger had signed agreements with 35 publishers who offered paid content; she also sought sponsors to make some new writing free to subscribers and organised 'big reads' of new fiction to encourage users to purchase new writing through collective engagement (Polanka). By 2013, the website had 'delivered more than 50 million instalments'; in 2015, *Crunchbase* identified

it as 'the oldest and largest digital distributor of daily serialized fiction'. However, the website was not maintained after its sale to Plympton in 2013 (*Crunchbase*); by late November 2022, it was defunct. The increasing popularity and availability of apps, including messaging apps that greatly diminished email traffic, also explain the demise.

But serialized, bite-sized digital literature was not dead. In 2016, web and mobile developer Michael Schmitt created *Serial Reader*, an app that delivers 'daily bite-sized bits' of public domain literature to smartphones (Schmitt, 'Seven Years of *Serial Reader*'). Featured as one of 'Apple's Best New Apps' in 2016, Schmitt still maintains the app in 2023. Like Danziger, Schmitt created the app to redress his own temporal challenges to reading canonical literature by bite-sizing its space; unlike Danziger, Schmitt wanted to slow down his consumption to expand its quality rather than to ramp up its quantity:

> I built the app to improve my reading habits by slowing down: limiting myself to digest smaller parts of dense literature over many days helped me think more critically about the work and retain more of the story. Others find it's a great way to work through otherwise daunting books, or to luxuriously re-read old favourites. (*Serial Reader*, 'About')

Schmitt explains why *Pride and Prejudice*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Moby Dick* were the most popular books for bite-sizing in 2016:

> These are the books held up culturally as The Important Books, but they could also break a coffee table with the weight of their pages and density of their stories. These are the books people most want to read but need an extra push or helping hand to get through. And I hope that's what *Serial Reader* provides to them. (Chen)

On 26 March 2023, the most popular titles were *Wuthering Heights*, *War and Peace*, and *The Art of War* (*Serial Reader*); there is greater national variation, but nineteenth-century novels still top the list.

Schmitt, a backend software engineer at ReviewTrackers rather than a publisher with publisher contacts, offers only public domain literature. He is mostly self-funded, but offers Serial Premium, 'a one-time in-app purchase for $2.99 (US) that unlocks additional features: Read Ahead, Cloud Sync, notes, highlights, additional fonts, and more' to 'help[] me dedicate more time to developing *Serial Reader*'. While the app creates more time for him to read it also requires subscriber money to create 'more time' to develop it. In this dynamic, subscribers figure as both investors in and beneficiaries of app development: 'More features may be added to Serial Premium in the future for no additional cost' (*Serial Reader*, 'About'). While for Harvey time-space compression means that 'Past experience gets compressed into some overwhelming present' (291), for users of *Serial Reader*, past experience encourages present investment in the hope of improved future experience—a gain figured as qualitative rather than quantitative, cooperative rather than corporate.

In May 2021, subscribers to the newsletter *Dracula Daily* began to receive Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1891) divided into what creator Matt Kirkland nominates 'bite-sized chunks' via email (Hensel). Its second run (2022) had 230,000 subscribers, with a third run planned for 2023 (Connors; see also Young in this special issue).

Bite-sizing newly-written literature <heading level 4>

Also dedicated to increasing literary quality through bite-sizing are online magazines featuring newly written literature. The *Dribble Drabble Review*,[1] established in 2020 as 'A Proud Member of the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses' (CLMP), continues modernist and postmodern experimentation with short-form literature that seeks to develop literary craft and test the limits of the medium. Spanning a modest seven countries, forty authors, and fifty works, the *Review* is less interested in expanding readership via compressed writing than in how bite-sizing creates an 'inverse proportionality' where 'the real subject matter (or theme) of fictions of this kind is often as big as the works are (in a material sense) small' (Alcock). The website's subtitle, 'Where Little-ature Is Big', foregrounds bite-sized literature's expansiveness as qualitative rather than quantitative as does its home page, prominently blazoned with logos of awards won for its website, writing, and print anthology. The website *Brave New Fiction*, created by Brit Gardner, co-founder of Figaro Interactive in 2008, also describes itself as creatively adaptive – 'a new take on storytelling', arguing that 'creativity flows when constraints are applied and often the most compelling creations come from the most unforgiving constraints' (*Brave New Fiction*, 'FAQ').

But *Brave New Fiction* was not solely interested in creative experimentation: it was also interested in adapting literature to new social media digital formats to attract new audiences. Adopting the time-space compression of the *Twitter* tweet, it allowed authors to publish only 'one line a day' of '140 characters or less' to 'keep your readers coming back for more', just as they return to *Twitter* daily for more content (*Brave New Fiction*). Bite-sizing here is figured as essential and integral to greater consumption.

By 2013 the site was defunct. Here, as with other dedicated literary websites that have come and gone, newly written bite-sized literature has had a more sustainable presence on

---

[1] A dribble is fifty words; a drabble is one hundred words.

social media platforms maintained by internet conglomerates such as Meta (*Facebook*; *Instagram*; *WhatsApp*), Twitter, Inc. (*Twitter*), and Google (*YouTube*, home of the channel *Bitesized Audio Classics*) who may merge and sell but do not go under.

Social media authors seek to increase not only literary quality through compression of content but also to increase the quantity of their readers. As Michael Rudin attests, 'Twitterers are not just colonizing a new realm of short-form creativity; they are leveraging the network effect to rope some portion of *Twitter*'s worldwide community into their personal readership'. Improv actor Sean Hill started the *Twitter* account @VeryShortStory in 2009, posting 140-character stories based on nouns suggested by followers. For example, in response to the noun 'Tuesday', he tweeted: 'My boss asked where I was. "I'm boycotting Mondays." The idea spread. People stayed home. Now we hated Tuesday' (Hill, @VeryShortStory). Not only did *Twitter* increase his readership but his substantial following also led to a print publication with Ulysses Press for *Very Short Stories: 300 Bite-Size Works of Fiction* (Hill; Gross).

The unparalleled superstar of bite-sized literature's journey from social media to print publication, however, is Punjabi Canadian poet Rupi Kaur. After seeking print publication without success, she began sharing poems on *Instagram* in 2012, when it was still a photo-sharing platform, under the hashtag *#instapoetry*. Whilst the term denotes only temporal compression, in practice it is inseparable from spatial compression: 'The limited confines of an *Instagram* post incentivize the bite-size lyric, the tidy aphorism, the briefly deliverable quote' (Hill and Yuan). Kaur's performance poetry had been 20 minutes in length (Kaur, 'I'm Taking My Body Back'); *Instagram* constrains the time and space of her poems, as in:

happiness grew old

waiting for me

I grew old

searching for happiness

in places it did not live (Kaur, 'happiness')

By 2015, Kaur's compressed, bite-sized instapoetry had gone viral, reaching expansively across time and space to millions of readers globally.

For Kaur, bite-sized poetry posted on social media shifted power relations with publishers. In 2015, Andrews McMeel Publishing re-released her first poetry volume (self-published in 2014); it remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 41 weeks generating enormous profits for this tiny company. Her second volume, published by Simon and Schuster in 2017, debuted at number 1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list and remained there for 70 weeks (Navlakha). By April 2023, Kaur's first two volumes had 'sold over 11 million copies and … been translated into over 43 languages' (Andrews McMeel Publishing).

However, *Instagram* is not solely or even primarily a platform for celebrity poets. As of 14 December 2022, 5,229,934 posts bore the hashtag *#instapoetry*, only 1680 of these by Kaur. On the same date, *#poetry* attached to a staggering 71,681,670 posts (*Instagram*, '#instapoetry'; '#poetry'). Instapoetry has been credited with reviving poetry for a new generation of readers; with democratizing, multiplying, and diversifying poetic voices; and with providing digital publication platforms for countless poets who would be rejected by print publishers presses (Byager).

Yet even as social media has exponentially expanded the production and consumption of bite-sized poetry, critics have decried its reduction of quality, with some denying that it is even poetry at all (see Aman; Burnam; Hodgkinson; Leszkiewicz). Conversely, traditional poetry held up as models by litearti are equally rejected by followers of instapoetry. The lack of perceived 'quality' in instapoetry is located precisely in the very compression and transparent linguistic immediacy that have rendered it accessible and inspiring to mass audiences, inspiring millions not only to read but also to write poetry. Instapoetry has been

hailed as keeping poetry alive by adapting it to new audiences and their technologies at the same time it has been denounced as the death knell of poetry. Here as in so many other discourses of literary adaptations to popular forms, expanding production and consumption are seen not only as regressions in adaptation that destroy literary quality but also adaptations that threaten to render earlier forms extinct (Elliott 2003, 51-52). These fears are rarely borne out in reality. For novelist Thomas W. Hodgkinson, 'It's still too early to say if Instapoetry will fulfil its potential … to emerge as a lighter, clearer form, with the fleeting perfection of a pop song' (Hodgkinson).

Bite-sized literature and the rhetoric of food <heading level 2>

Discussions of bite-sized literature feed and are fed by longstanding tropes of literature as food for the mind, soul, psyche, emotions, or character (Stephenson), as in the foundational Hebrew Bible's declaration: 'man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (ESV Bible, Deuteronomy 8:3). Continuities between religious and literary canons are widely canvased and debated (Bloom); discourses of literary 'taste' and 'consumption' are also well established (Gigante; Brown). Authors of bite-sized digital literature adapt these traditions, repeating them with variations: kevinjresureccion, self-published *Wattpad* author of *Bite-Sized Poetry*, affirms: 'I want to help fuel your mind and imagination'; Kaur titled her first printed collection of Instagram posts *milk and honey* [*sic*], welcomed as 'comfort food for the soul' by followers (Motherkind Café). Reviewing *Serial Reader*, *MacStories* nominates it 'A useful tool that makes it easy in our modern world to make classic books part of your reading diet' (*Serial Reader*). The implication is clear: 'classic books', like leafy greens and micronutrients, are good for readers.

A rhetoric of food also permeates digital terminology. Joining bytes and nybbles are other gustatory terms such as feeds, menus, Java, chips, and cookies, to name only a few (see Howe for more). Authors post bite-sized literature on social media 'feeds'; digital literary websites offer menus and ask users to agree to cookies. More specific to this discussion of bite-sizing, Apple's logo is an apple with a bite-sized chunk bitten out. The original Apple logo, designed by Ronald Wayne, featured an eighteenth-century style illustration of Isaac Newton reading under a tree bearing a highlighted apple positioned directly above his head, . the image framed by a quotation from William Wordsworth (this illustration can be seen at The Logo Creative). Apple founder Steve Jobs considered it too old-fashioned and it was swiftly replaced by the bitten apple logo, designed by Ron Janoff. Janoff explains that the bite was introduced to avoid confusion with a cherry tomato and to play on bite/byte (The

Logo Creative). The shift from archaic graphics, historical allusion, and Romantic poetic

quotation to the sleekly modern, wordless word play of the bitten apple not only conjoins

literature and computing tropes but also epitomizes the streamlining of shifts to bite-sized

literature, as metaphors of literature as food shift to metaphors of bite-sized literary snacks.

The Wycliffe Bible Translators market their app in these terms: 'think about how you "eat"

God's Word. It's so easy to just snack on Scripture—consuming little bites on apps

throughout the week'. Poet kevinjresureccion likewise advises: 'Some things are best read in

short bursts, like little snacks in the middle of a busy day.' J. D. Biersdorfer, consumer

technology writer for the *New York Times*, assesses that apps delivering bite-sized fiction

such as *Radish* (discussed further below) are 'proudly taking the mantle of snackable pulp

fiction into the digital age'. Smaller, more frequent 'meals' are presented as more compatible

with the pace of contemporary life and more digestible and sustaining in such contexts.

However, others denigrate bite-sized literature by analogies to fast food. Reviewer

Sophie Mo disparages Kaur's instapoetry as 'instant ramen soup': quick to make and

consume, requiring 'little thought in both reading and writing'. Against the 'new plague of

byte-sized diversions', English professor David Mikics pits 'slow cooking, slow thinking,

and … slow reading'. 'To read well requires appetite' and digital users are 'hungry refugees

from the regime of endless, tasty-but-unsatisfying bits of information' (8; 6; 17). In *The*

Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age, literary critic Sven Bikerts

contends that 'fluid instantaneity and unprecedented electric connectivity' have generated 'a

life hurried and fragmented on every front', in which 'attention spans have shrunk and

fragmented'. Lamenting the 'restless, grazing behaviour of clicking and scrolling', he

laments that no one 'has the time or will to read books the way people used to'. These critics

are more in line with Apple executive Jean Louis Gassé's reading of the Apple logo as 'the

symbol of lust and knowledge' (The Logo Creative), where the bitten apple raises the more

aggressive connotations of biting and the transgressive and destructive aspects of bite-sized consumption by analogy to the Judeo-Christian story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge. For critics of bite-sized literature, the logo aligns with their sense of a literary fall into bite-sizing.

However, digital literary bite-sizing has no essentialist relationship to superficial or hasty reading. Schmitt developed *Serial Reader* to slow down and deepen his reading of long works: 'It's a heck of a lot of fun to binge on books … but sometimes it's much more rewarding to slow down a little' (Schmitt, 'How I Tricked Myself into Reading Better'). Esther Chen describes the process as 'break[ing] up the texts into digestible chunks' (Chen). In 'Seasoning', kevinjresureccion similarly celebrates the 'good taste' and slow savouring of his bite-sized poems:

> All done in good taste. Flavour speaks
>
> To me. Each bite I savour long
>
> And slow.

Opposing views that smaller portions are superficially consumed, unsatisfying, and intellectually stunting more scientifically and quantitatively, numerous studies demonstrate that delivering content in bite-sized portions deepens knowledge and retention by providing *more* time and space in which to process complex content more slowly. These studies offer further instances of how compression paradoxically expands the time and space of reading, deepening its comprehension and enabling readers to retain it in memory (see, for example, Manning *et al.*).

That said, digital bite-sizing can and does allow for rapid, partial, digressive, unfinished, and disposable attitudes to reading, precluding any universal conclusion about whether bite-sized literature enables slow, deep reading. How bite-sized literature is read can depend on what is being read. Francis Bacon wrote in 1597:

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed

and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but

not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.

(444)

Yet the variety of bite-sized digital literature is not the only factor in how people read

it. Digital bite-sizing constitutes an adaptation not only of literature to new audiences,

platforms, technologies, industries, and so forth but also to the bite-sizing of other digital

content. Literary bite-sizing has not happened in a literary vacuum: its contexts include bite-

sizing from web page blogging to *Twitter* microblogging; from 63,206 character limits on

Facebook posts to 280-character limits on *Twitter* (up from the original 140); from *YouTube*

videos lasting hours to *TikTok* videos lasting seconds. Social media marketing guru Werner

Geyser recommends that influencers limit *Facebook* posts to 40-80 characters (Geyser, 'Best

Length for Social Media Posts') and that the short-form video, defined as less than 60

seconds long, 'is the most popular and effective social media content format' (Geyser, 'Short-

Form Video').

In 'Reading Books as Bite-sized Tweets', Robert Blanc writes that consuming social

media caused him to adapt his way of reading literary works:

[M]y brain has been rewired and trained to spend time on social media platforms such

as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and another handful of these places serving you

bite-sized pieces of content … I began to treat books as if they were blog posts to be

read on the fly, or as bite-sized tweets or *Facebook* posts … I'm currently reading

summaries and snippets from tens or even hundreds of books at a time … I treat

books as if they were mere pieces of information that I could easily discard and throw

away back into the world. It's all about compression.

Here, the consumer rather than the producer does the bite-sizing: here, the compression of bite-sizing literature enables the expansion of reading space across multiple books.

Blanc cites Jürgen Schmidhuber, an award-winning, widely cited artificial intelligence researcher, to explicate his reading process. Schmidhuber claims that a human drive towards 'compression progress' has caused scientists and computer programmers to seek the most compressed way of formulating principles in mathematical formulae and that 'compression progress' also occurs by generating cognitive rewards such as 'interestingness', surprise, novelty, curiosity, beauty, and active experimentation': 'In the absence of external reward … our controller essentially tries to maximize true novelty or interestingness, the first derivative of subjective beauty of compressibility. … It will get bored by things that already are subjectively compressible' (8). Active choice such as Blanc's is central to generating cognitive rewards (9). Schmidhuber is not alone in his findings. Ludmila Lupinacci is one of many to examine how 'social media generate a sense of unpredictable flow and potential eventfulness in order to prompt an ongoing quest for affective sparks in their users'.

The temporal factor explicating bite-sized digital consumption, then, is less one of overall time spent than of tempo. Paradoxically, smaller media portions can and do expand the time of media consumption (*Statista*, 'Average Time Spent'; 'Binge-Viewers'). Because digital platforms are 'attention economies', in which 'the user's attention is the product'; 'The prime incentive for an attention-economy internet business is to get its users to devote prolonged periods of time to its website' (Bhargava and Velasquez 321; 340-41). Far from attention *deficit* driving bite-sized digital consumption (Subramanian), bite-sizing aims to generate an *excess* of attention. Whether that attention is sold to advertisers, used to attract investors and sponsors, or funded by user subscriptions and in-app purchases (Goanta *et al.*), time is money: both the overall length of time spent on digital platforms (Bhargava and Velasquez 340) and the frequency with which they visit them, measured in daily or monthly

active users (Queensbury 17). Bite-sized content maximises both, as users click or scroll swiftly through short content, return more often for more, and consume bite-sized portions for longer.

Bite-sized literature has generated both greater consumption and profits for apps, especially those using serialized formats. Fragmenting long works into smaller parts increases the number of user hits, clicks, streams, downloads (etc.) on which platform income is based. From the mid-2010s, the ascendancy of app over website and email usage, the rise of the attention economy, and the use of algorithms aimed at keeping users on apps has given rise to a proliferation of literary apps offering newly written, bite-sized, serialized fiction in popular genres (*Galatea*, *Novel-Wolf Werewolf* Story, *Radish*, *Readom*, *Romance Novel*, *Storyaholic*, *WeHear, Yonder*, and more). Their business models are based on micropayments attached to bite-sized literary portions, rendering bite-sizing an essential part of their business design and income generation.

The app *Radish* was founded on Valentine's Day 2015. It offers only newly written, 'Bite-sized Fiction': a 'wide variety of curated, premium, and original stories … published and read in bite-sized instalments, with some stories adding new episodes up to 5 times a day' (*Radish*, 'About'). Co-founder SY [Syeong-yoon] Lee designed the app based on 'freemium' publishing in China, where in 2012, over 40% of internet users paid to visit self-publishing websites every month (Hockx 4). 'In China, top online writers–known as *zhigaoshen*, or "supreme gods"–can earn millions of dollars a year' (Laporte). All of *Radish*'s '2000+ published authors' are paid (*Radish* takes 50% of sales).

Radish offers a mix of free and paid bite-sized fiction to users. Free content is free to read at any time; premium content requires payment (*Radish*, 'Pricing'). There are no unlimited subscriptions. Some series start out free but require payment to continue. 'Premium' subscribers pay three in-app coins per episode; 'Freemium' users can either spend

money or *time* waiting to read the next episode for free – 'a minimum of seven days'.

Radish advises authors: 'This model will warm readers up to paying for your stories'. Its

most profitable pricing model is 'Wait-to-Unlock':

> [R]eaders can wait a designated timeframe to unlock [an hourglass episode] for free.
>
> If your readers want to read an hourglass episode without waiting, they can pay to
>
> unlock it early … stories on this model earn an average of 5x more coins than
>
> Premium and 38x more coins than Freemium. (*Radish*, 'Pricing')

The adage that time is money takes on new dimensions here, as time (waiting seven+ days for

the next episode) is weighed against money (spending three in-app coins costing $0.49 in

March 2023). Bite-sized serialized portions attach to a choice: pay or wait.

User micropayments are well-established in gaming apps, where gamers can

(sometimes must) pay for tools to move to the next level. Moving from literary episode to

episode requires other kinds of motivation. *Radish* relies on sensational genres ('the hottest

romance, mystery, thriller, and fantasy fiction stories … everything from supernatural stories

of shape-shifting werewolves to romantic tales with billionaire bosses') and 'bingeable

stories … in bite-sized instalments' ending on cliffhangers to motivate readers to pay rather

than wait (*Radish*, 'About').

I have argued that the temporal dynamic driving expansive consumption of bite-sized

digital content is less one of overall time than of tempo; users of *Radish* and similar apps

want to keep the tempo going. User hati1998 remarks: 'I don't like reading little increments

of the story each day. When I start reading a book, I like to read at a rapid pace' (*Justuseapp*,

'*Galatea*'). AvidReading Mom attests to the successful pairing of bite-sized content and

cliffhangers: 'I love the fact that you read each line at a time and that the stories are short

leaving a sort of cliff hanger because it makes you want to read more' (*Justuseapp*,

'*Galatea*'). Other users have adopted reading habits akin to Blanc's. Becca Lynn Aite

remarks: 'One episode a day was never intended to give me my reading fix, so now I read a few stories at a time' (*Justuseapp*, '*Galatea*').

Connections between bite-sizing and tempo apply not only to the portion sizes for which users must wait or pay but also to the writing style. Season 1, Episode 1 of Jami Gallardo's 'The Billionaire's Surrogate', with 488.9 million views as of 28 March 2023, begins:

> I'm Emily Valdez. 24-year-old virgin. College student. And hired surrogate to Colton Collins—the sexy, enigmatic bachelor of the famous Collins family.
>
> I'm not the type of girl who treasures her virginity. Having sex with Colton is the best way to get pregnant with his child.
>
> He says he didn't pay me to take my virginity. I said I could handle it.
>
> I had no idea what I was getting into. (*Radish*, 'The Billionaire's Surrogate')

Short, punchy, incomplete, bite-sized sentences, spilling occasionally into longer clauses, establish a rapid tempo of reading accelerated by the transparency of the diction and its commonalities with chat messages or chatty conversations. *Radish* user MartinKM attests, 'I can read one of these chapters in less than 5 minutes', but complains, 'and then have to wait 55 more minutes until I get the next chapter for free' (*Justuseapp*, '*Radish*').

In apps like *Radish*, bite-sized writing and portioning and short reading times stretch into immense expanses of time and space. Episode 1 of 'The Billionaire's Surrogate' is 1456 words; Season 1 has 61 episodes. The entire series runs for 117 seasons over 3167 episodes (*Radish* app). Reading Season 1, Episode 1 took me 2.6 minutes. To read 3167 episodes at that rate would take me about 137 hours. Season 1's print version (published by Radish Fiction, 2021) spans 200 pages, each chapter averaging 3.2 pages. At that rate, a print version of all 3167 episodes would fill 10,134 pages. *Radish*'s bite-sized content, then, opens into temporospatial expansiveness, occupying thousands of reader minutes and virtual pages.

Were a reader to wait to read all 3167 episodes of 'The Billionaire's Surrogate' for free, it would take 8.67 years. To pay for all 3167 episodes of 'The Billionaire's Surrogate' at the standard three-coin rate would cost £1409.32. Even using the app's most discounted packages of 365 coins would cost £665.07. While free coins would accrue over the years of waiting, and while readers can earn coins by watching ads, time is still money: users must pay for time spent reading, bite by bite, or spend time waiting to read, or spend time watching adverts. Though recalling nineteenth-century serialized penny dreadfuls, *Radish*'s serialized tales are by no means low-budget alternatives to print books or unlimited subscriptions to digital literary platforms such as *Kindle Unlimited* (Laurinavicius). *Galatea* user Jasajobst affirms: 'I can spend $10 a month and read as many books as I want on my *Kindle*' (*Justuseapp*, '*Galatea*'). User hati1998 writes: 'There has to be another way to hook your readers besides the point system' (*Justuseapp*, '*Galatea*').

Here and elsewhere, there is a shift from the rhetoric of literary snacking and making literature more 'app-etizing' by offering it smaller, appetizer-sized portions to one of addictive binge-snacking on bite-sized literary chunks. (Binge-eating comes closest to meeting the criteria for addiction—Giacomo *et al*.) Such rhetoric is nothing new: the twitterature website *Brave New Fiction* urged readers to 'Get Hooked' as far back as 2009. In 2023, the rhetoric of addiction is everywhere in bite-sized fiction apps, as marketing calls app users to become users in the addictive sense of the word:

Indulge in thousands of the hottest binge-worthy stories (*Radish*, 'Home').

BINGE-READ / SNACK-READ unstoppable addictive stories (App Store, *Galatea*, emphasis in original).

Enjoy bite-sized, binge-worthy, thrill-packed stories on the go (Google Play, *Yonder*).

The very names of literary apps offering bite-sized content announce their aspirations to addict users. *Addicted* (Taras Kalkovets) offers users 'nail-biting', 'bite-sized text message

conversation' stories; 'hundreds of free scary stories so you can't stop read [*sic*] it' (Google Play, *Addicted*). The chat and video story app *Hooked* (Telepathic) urges: 'Get HOOKED on thrilling stories … everybody is obsessed with' (Google Play, *Hooked*, emphasis in original). Its name a portmanteau of 'reader' and 'addict', *Readict* (VitalTeck, Inc.) offers 'a library of addicting novels that will have you turning pages for countless hours (Google Play, *Readict*). *Storyaholic* (HK IReader Technology), offering 'millions of short stories', invites 'STORYAHOLICers' to 'finish a story in one day' (Google Play, *Storyaholic*, emphasis in original). *Bynge* offers 'bite-sized episodes of fiction serials from top writers in Indian languages' (*Bynge*, 'About').

This is all the more astonishing when one learns that such didactic, titular, celebratory rhetoric of addiction is *nowhere* to be seen in marketing for the social media and gaming apps that have been the main focus of internet addiction studies. *TikTok* says nothing about its algorithmically informed, addictive, bite-sized scrolling: only that its 'mission is to inspire creativity and bring joy' (*TikTok*). *Instagram*, using similar algorithms and bite-sized content to addict users, admits only an aim to 'bring you closer to the people and things you love' (*Instagram*, 'About Us'). Meta, parent company of *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *WhatsApp*, and *Messenger*, declares its purpose to give 'people the power to build community and bring the world closer together' (Meta). App Store, Google Play Store, and website promos for the top ten mobile gaming apps of 2022 recommended by John Koetsier all remain silent on the addictiveness of their designs, advertising only their challenges, competition, pacing, graphics, interactivity, game play, and rules of play. While a few new television apps such as *Binge BD* (RedDot 2020) engaging freemium and premium business models do announce addiction in their naming, the app to which they aspire, *Netflix*, says nary a word about bingeing or addiction in App Store, Google Play, and website promos. Numerous studies have shown that social media, gaming, and audio-visual streaming apps deliberately seek to

create both in their business models and platform designs (Bhargava and Velasquez; Kendall; Lupinacci, and many more) and marketing guides such as *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products* (Eyar) and 'How to Get Customers Addicted with Your Mobile App' (Singh) didactically advise app designers how to generate digital addictions.

Radish too attaches the rhetoric of addiction to economics when it advises authors to 'Hook your readers with chapters that they can unlock' (*Radish*, 'Pricing'). User Alejandra attests to the efficacy of these strategies:

> I am actually HOOKED on the story I am reading from RadishFiction. I have literally spent already $50 in coins trying to read the first half of a story and I am sorry, but that's RIDICULOUS!!!! You have the ability to gain 3 free coins every 3 hours, but that will only unlock 1 episode that only takes you 3 minutes to read. The whole stop and go thing kills you!! (*Justuseapp*, 'Radish', emphasis in original)

Jan in a Can confesses: 'I have an unhealthy addiction to RadishFiction. I'm like going broke bc I can't stop reading the stories ... the cliffhangers drive me crazy!' (*Justuseapp*, 'Radish'). As with other addictions, these and other literary app users are experiencing detrimental psychological and economic effects from their binge-snacking yet are unable to stop.

But app creators celebrate user accounts of their addition, citing them to market the app to other users. Inkitt's introduction to *Galatea* cites these reviews:

> Next paycheck, I'm spending on points and binge reading … I have no shame
>
> [The app] has me hooked!!! I am a true book junkie.

Marketers, producers, and users of literary apps are able to didactically celebrate addictive reading precisely because there is still a pervasive cultural opinion that reading is good for you, no matter what kind of reading it may be, and that watching videos, gaming, and spending time on social media, no matter the kind, is not.

Byte-sizing in the sense of digitization has adapted literature in many beneficial ways, increasing global literacy and access to literature (Elliott 2020), democratizing and diversifying reading, writing, and publishing, giving platforms to those who would never have published under traditional print media hierarchies (Skains). Digitization has furthermore broken down binaries between the production and consumption of literature (Skains), creating prosumers (Toffler; De Rosa *et al*.). In the twenty-first century, digitization has adapted literature for new generations of readers and writers, disseminating teen/young adult literature much more widely than ever before. *Wattpad* describes itself as 'The world's most-loved social storytelling platform', with literature posted in at least 55 languages, connecting 'a community of more than 94 million people who spend over 23 billion minutes a month engaged in original stories'. *Wattpad* fosters interactivity between users, as readers vote for, comment on, and share stories. The app's 'inline comments' function lets readers post comments on bite-sized sections of writing at the level of individual words and discuss them with other users. Readers can also post feedback to authors, which is often formative in the case of serialized writing. *Wattpad* has gone far beyond merely offering digital technologies for reading to incorporate the whole chain of writing, publishing, reading, marketing, disseminating, reviewing, critiquing, teaching, formal analysis, and adaptation to other media (*Wattpad*, 'Webtoon Studios'). Ninety percent of *Wattpad* users are Gen Z/millennials (*Wattpad,* 'HQ').

Digitization has given readers more power over what other readers read than ever before via review platforms such as *Goodreads* (Amazon) and *BookTok*, a sub-strand of *TikTok* (ByteDance). *BookTok* reader reviews have sent obscure books viral; would-be authors have pitched ideas for a book and received six-figure publisher and film rights contracts (Flood). A 2022 study by the UK based Publishers Association found that 59% of

16-25-year-olds report 'that *BookTok* or book influencers have helped them discover a passion for reading; 55% turn to *BookTok* for recommendations (38% ahead of asking friends and family); 66% said that *BookTok* inspired them to read a book they would have never considered otherwise' (Publishers Association). In these ways, digitally compressing literature has not only expanded literary consumption but also changed the balance of power in how literature is produced, consumed, and marketed, and for whom.

These dynamics have been encouraged not only because they democratize literature but also because democratization and interactivity feed company profits: 'influencers can be as effective as or more effective than advertising by either brands or celebrities' (Rosengren and Campbell 505). Similarly, reader responses provide valuable feedback to authors and publishers that can increase profits, especially in the case of ongoing, serialized fiction and apps that publish only certain kinds of fiction. More generally interactivity on literary platforms creates greater traffic that generates greater profits; particularly pertinent to the addictive apps we have examined, 'The interactive aspects of the internet … seem to be more likely to lead to internet addiction than purely solitary web surfing' (Beard *et al*.).

Bite-sizing in the sense of digital literary *portioning* has also been (to continue and conclude the argument that compression produces expansion) enormously adaptive of and beneficial to the spread and survival of literature. We have seen that some bite-size literature to produce greater quality writing and reading; others bite-size it to meet goals to read more overall. Authors and publishers bite-size literature to keep old writing alive and render new writing resonant. Whatever one's opinion of Instapoetry, it has indubitably revived poetry for a new generation. Most instapoets are young women of colour; most of their readers are young women (Manning); *Wattpad* is a platform used primarily to read original stories written by teenagers (Contreras). (Gallardo began as a teen writer on *Wattpad*.) Authors who

produce successful bite-sized literature for apps such as *Galatea* earn considerably more than they can in other publishing environments (Lunden).

However, even as digital bite-sizing has expanded literature both qualitatively and quantitively, algorithms are shrinking the democratically expansive effects prior to their use. Kaur became a *New York Times* bestselling author because of her millions of *Instagram* followers. *Instagram*'s use of algorithms from 2016 'threaten to stifle a whole new generation of poets' (Ford), as algorithms determine what enters user feeds rather than the accounts they follow. Posts no longer automatically reach all followers of an instapoet; poets must pay to promote posts. For those with numerous followers, costs are prohibitive (Ford). Apps attaching bite-sized literature to micropayments are also constricting literature in various ways. Foregrounding sensational content, cliff-hangers, and bite-sized sentence structures to induce addictive 'binge snack reading' (*Galatea*) delimits literary diversity. At the same time, these apps have been stupendously successful at inducing consumption precisely because their algorithms are so *adaptive*. As algorithms co-adapt app content to user tastes and tempos, platform designs create conflicts between the timing and spacing of bite-sized content to frustrate the very reading tempo that users prefer so that they will pay for content that is theoretically free. We have seen the efficacy of this design in that Radish's statement that Wait-to-Unlock pricing generates thirty-eight times more income than free content and five times more than paid content (*Radish*, 'Pricing'). The didactic promotion and celebration of addiction is engaged not simply to make reading seem exciting and transgressive or because reading is considered to be good for readers and being addicted to what is 'good' is socially acceptable but also because app companies want to create an expectation that users will be able to binge-read addictively and freely, while its platform and business design frustrates addictive reading unless users consent to pay for content. Small micropayments expand into exorbitant prices, as we have seen. Users are free to quit the apps

as users do other addictions, and many do (see the reviews for *Galatea*, *Radish*, and other apps of this kind on *Justuseapp*, the App Store, and Google Play).

Even as these apps attract new users, non-profit and reasonably priced digital literary platforms remain, offering bite-sized literature for other reasons and different demographics. And new bite-sized digital literary adaptations will indubitably emerge as the twenty-first century continues.