

# Writing Touch at the Interface: *Luxuria Superbia's* Exploratory Play with Self-Writing

LAURA SHACKELFORD

## ABSTRACT

Digital literary works, such as *Luxuria Superbia* (2013) an interactive, *verbicovisual* experimental tablet game, recombine media, modes, and genres of writing to comparatively reconsider and assess shifting writing practices. These works reveal the complex relations linking prior print to emergent digital forms of self-writing. They are particularly concerned with how shifting writing practices help to co-realize distinct subjectivities, intersubjective relations and lived spaces. *Luxuria Superbia* experiments

with touch-based, multimodal digital writing, asking how it might alter gendered and sexualized assumptions about subjective boundaries and lived spaces. Such exploratory play with performative practices of self-writing and with intersubjective touching at the interface move discussions of digital media beyond the limiting Heideggerian frame of the properly human toward more thoroughgoing understandings of how *technics* repeatedly reenter the human, her past and present handwriting.

Writing serves as a primary practice of subject-formation and register of self-experience within modern print cultures. Emerging digital writing practices, with distinct material affordances and conventions are therefore currently the site of sustained inquiries into what alternate practices and elaborations of self and intersubjective relations these kinds of writing might open onto. These are inquiries carried out by fields as varied as literary studies, narratology, interactive media and game design, philosophy of technology, feminism and gender studies, and electronic literature, among others. How are the spatial and temporal, material coordinates of writing spaces, as they establish a series of select, dynamic “interface relations” according to Johanna Drucker, Alexander Galloway, and Nigel Thrift,<sup>1</sup> influencing the self-understanding of readers and writers at preconscious and conscious levels? And how do such shifting processes of subject formation influence and enter into understandings of embodied experience as well as *lived space*, more broadly, at phenomenological, material, symbolic, and social levels?

Hand-held mobile technologies with touch-based interfaces, in particular, raise key questions about alternate modes of writing and reading interactive, multimodal digital interfaces, and how these might co-realize discrepant modes of self, intersubjective connection, touching, and feeling together, as a result of the shifting dynamics. While digital writing practices appear to supersede former delimitations of subjectivity in noticeable ways, they also have a complex set of relations to prior forms of self and self-writing. Recent digital literary works, such as the experimental game experience that I will focus on in this essay, *Luxuria Superbia*—released for tablets and mobile phones in 2013—provide unique, practice-based lines of inquiry into the questions raised by digital writing. As the phrase, the “digital literary,” is meant to suggest, these works creatively juxtapose and recombine prior print-based media, modes, and genres of writing with emergent digital practices of writing. As I will illustrate with *Luxuria Superbia*, they provide an invaluable, comparative perspective on shifting writing practices as they reflexively experiment with how digital writing practices currently, and might

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1. Johanna Drucker, Alexander Galloway, and Nigel Thrift have each theorized the “semantic meaning,” “interface relations,” and “paratexts” established through graphical user interfaces and other software, underscoring the kinds of reading and the spatiotemporal enframing of self experience and communication distinct media practices reinforce, often at nonconscious levels.

potentially, impact self-writing and, by extension, the intersubjectivities put into circulation. Their comparative digital literary experiments recognize and retrace some of the recursive processes through which writing practices are both re-embedded and transformed by new media. In this respect, they usefully complicate theories of media change as a linear, progressive, uniquely technological “revolution.” More importantly, in reflecting back on the medial, technological, symbolic, and phenomenological levels, to the reading and writing practices they participate in, these experimental works enable a comparative consideration of distinct practices and understandings of self-writing, as *technics*, or dynamic, mutually transformative interrelations between subjects and writing technologies. This is opposed to understanding writing as a standalone instrument or expressive tool.<sup>2</sup>

Approaching writing practices as co-productive, contingent subject-technology relations, i.e., as an influential kind of *technics*, digital literary experiments adeptly reconsider how these digital writing practices enter into and differentially reshape gendered and sexualized subjectivities, intersubjective relations, and the lived spaces (as well as writing spaces) they co-realize. Playfully invoking the Latin terms for Christian culture’s two “deadly sins” of lust (*luxuria*) and pride (*superbia*), *Luxuria Superbia* comparatively juxtaposes Medieval tablet cultures and practices of self-writing. It draws on prior writing practices as a resource in its efforts to digitally facilitate readers’ awareness of modes of self-writing and experiences of touch, intersubjective connection, and lived space other than those currently privileged within digital cultures and recent print cultures.

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2. My use of *technics* is in keeping with recent efforts to think through the human’s technicity and understand distinct subject-technology relations as co-productive, dynamic interrelations between subjects and technologies. More in keeping with the Greek root of technical, this approach reconceives subject-technology relations as *a process*, rather than as pre-existing subjects and/or neutral instruments or tools. These emerging theories of *technics* shift emphasis onto the processes or productive relations that generate what we later come to see as self-apparent subjects and technical objects. This enables one to examine *technics* in their capacity as socially embedded and embedding practices, as interrelations between emergent technologies and existing social and cultural relations that are mutually transformative rather than a one-way street from technological to social change, or the inverse. I redescribe *technics*, following recent thinking about subject-technology relations in philosophy, feminist science studies, systems theory, and critical geographies as *interrelations* between subjects, technologies, and social systems to shift emphasis onto the productive, at once social, cultural, material, and technical relations that generate what later come to be seen as self-apparent subjects and technical objects. See Arthur Bradley and Louis Armand, *Technicity* (2006) and Don Ihde, *Ironic Technics* (2010).

## A Garden of Earthly, Spiritual Delights

*Luxuria Superbia* was first showcased at the international game design festival, IndieCade, in the fall of 2013 and released shortly thereafter for the iPad, Mac, and PC. It was created by the small, award-winning independent game development studio, *Tale of Tales* (based in the Medieval city of Ghent, Belgium, as they note on their website). *Tale of Tales* includes artists Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, trained as a sculptor and graphic designer respectively, who have been collaborating since 1999 and regularly join efforts with additional artists, such as Walter Hus who composed the music for this game. They are, perhaps, best known for *The Path*, an interactive game that restages the *Little Red Riding Hood* narrative within its more contemporary game space. As it asks players to guide several female avatars to grandmother's house, *The Path* requires players to leave the "path" in order to explore the woods, exactly the nonlinear, exploratory narrative and reading process the original narrative interdicts. *Luxuria Superbia* is similarly interested in engaging the exploratory dimensions to digital writing and gameplay as these replay, recycle, and might more radically reorient prior print practices. It is particularly intent, I would argue, on comparatively casting into relief proprietary, gendered modes of self and intersubjectivity that digital writing and game spaces more frequently recapitulate.<sup>3</sup>

In an interview with *Hip Hop Gamer* during IndieCade, Auriea Harvey explains how *Luxuria Superbia* emerged out of a research project on concentric circles, which figure prominently in the game's visual environments. She goes on to acknowledge that they were "looking for intersections between spirituality, sex, and gaming, believe it or not" (Ashphord). As unexpected as these three terms may be in combination, one of the underlying threads that ties them together,

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3. Here I am explicitly referencing a liberal humanist understanding of subjectivity characterized by Crawford B. MacPherson as "possessive individualism," which defines self as a form of proprietary self-ownership, often accomplished through one's disembodied self-abstraction in print discourse or self-authorship, which is implicitly gendered masculine and racialized as white. As I have argued elsewhere and intend to suggest here, digital writing practices often extend rather than transform this proprietary conception of subjectivity as a form of self-authorship or self-ownership. See Shackelford, *Tactics of the Human: Experimental Technics in American Fiction*.

and also helps to unpack the game's focus and modes of inquiry, is the question of touch, of modes of interconnection between self and other, movements between inside and outside, between spiritual and material, and a larger practical and theoretical concern with feeling together, particularly as these questions are raised and impacted by interactive media, games, and digital technologies.<sup>4</sup> *Luxuria Superbia* actively explores the potential of hand-held, touch-based digital interfaces and their textual, visual modalities in developing its comparative perspective on spiritual, sexual, and other kinds of interconnection. Touch is, it should be stressed, one of the primary gestures and experiences of intersubjective experience, both bodily and spiritual. Thus, it makes sense that touch-based technologies raise these questions about current conventions of touch and its relation to intersubjective experience once again.

With its opening screen, which asks readers to "Touch me," *Luxuria Superbia* launches readers on their exploration of one of twelve uniquely colored "flowers" that, once selected, open onto a dynamic, interactive visual and sonic space that is highly responsive to one's movements, pace, and path of exploration (see fig. 1). Readers rotate a circular dial to select one colored flower (and level of the game) or to return to one they might not have fully completed. The game takes full advantage of the multimodal dimensions (sonic, visual, textual, kinetic) to digital writing spaces and its hand-held, touch interface as it encourages readers to enter into these "flowers" (or "tunnels," as the designers also refer to them), and move through their winding, encircling walls. In keeping with these entwining spaces and navigation, one is encouraged to turn the tablet in one's hands, strengthening the engagement with this hand-held gamespace even further and expanding gameplay to include the space of reading as an additional, entwining circuit. Through the exploration of each sexually suggestive "flower," readers are encouraged

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4. Importantly, *Luxuria Superbia* is one of a growing subgenre of independent digital games that focus on enabling meditative and/or spiritual experiences, such as Tracy Fullerton's recent interactive game, *Walden, A Game*, which "simulates the experiment in living made by Thoreau at Walden Pond in 1845–47, allowing players to walk in his virtual footsteps, attend to the tasks of living a self-reliant existence, discover in the beauty of a virtual landscape the ideas and writings of this unique philosopher, and cultivate through the gameplay their own thoughts and responses to the concepts discovered there" ("Walden, A Game").



fig. 1. "Touch me," screenshot from *Luxuria Superbia*'s opening screen.

and in subtle ways guided through twelve differently themed paths to bodily and spiritual ecstasy of some sort, as if these are flowers in "a garden of earthly delights" as well as spiritual ones, to adapt the modern title of Hieronymous Bosch's triptych to this context.

The sexually and spiritually evocative dimensions to one's touch-based explorations of these "flowers" and "tunnels" and to the game's broader themes are explicitly reinforced in that readers can alter the main menu's screen view, revealing a vertical perspective of this dial or wheel, as opposed to the initial, top-down perspective on the blooms of these twelve vibrantly colored "flowers." When seen from the side, the openings of these flowers are revealed to be the pinnacle or top of one of twelve differently colored columns comprising a larger, open-air temple. In addition to complicating and confounding readers' sense of these "flowers" or "tunnels," as a result of these two distinct, apparently interior as opposed to exterior views, the image of the temple redoubles one's initial understanding of these paths of exploration and modes of interconnection as material, organic, or sexual in character with its suggestion of their simultaneously spiritual and otherworldly dimensions (see fig. 2).

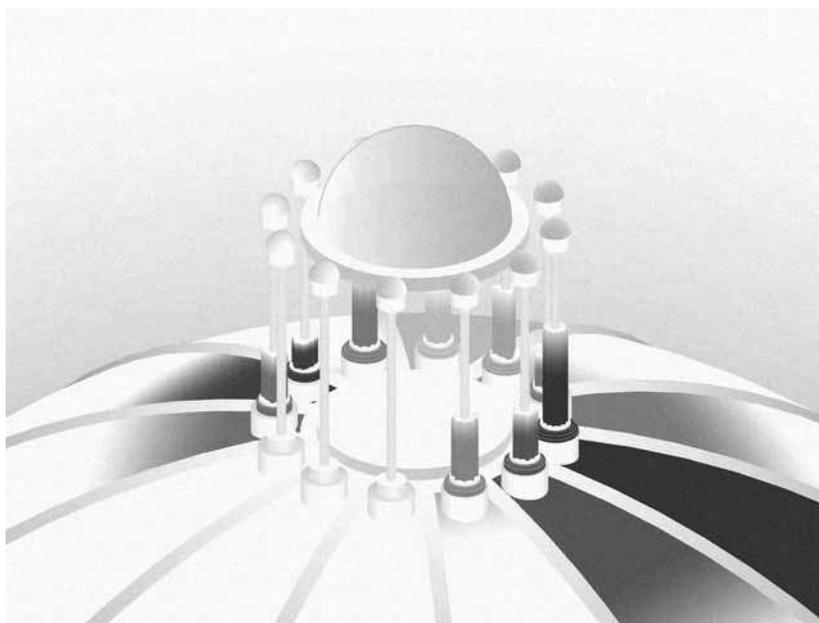
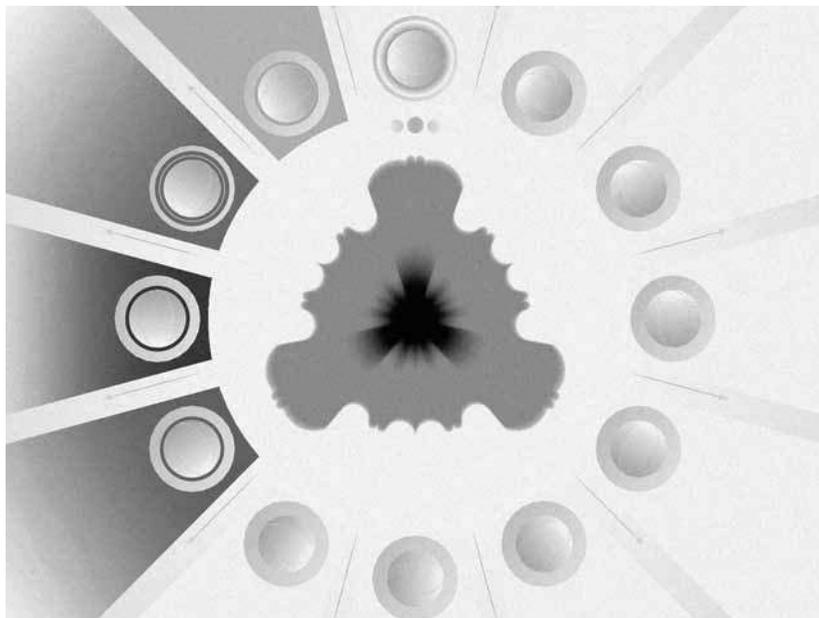


fig. 2. Introductory menu of *Luxuria Superbia* (top) and vertical view of the temple (bottom).

In allowing readers to alternate between these two views of the gamespace, *Luxuria Superbia* foregrounds its own status as a game interface. It also draws an important parallel between architectural spaces such as the temple, writing spaces, modes of self-writing, and digital game interfaces in their functioning as *paratextual* spatial organizations (or productive, material and rhetorical conventions of enframing). It clues readers subtly into *Luxuria Superbia's* overarching, comparative concern with the kinds of intersubjective experience, comingling, touch, and interrelations to the world or lived space these distinct material practices (in architecture, writing technologies, genres of writing, and gameplay) encourage and work to materially co-realize, as well as those they obscure.

### **Reading *Luxuria Superbia* as “Visionary Memoir”**

In its pursuit of interconnections between “spirituality, sex, and gaming,” *Luxuria Superbia* implicitly revisits prior tablet-based practices of self-writing during the 12th–14th centuries that were directly tied to Christian religious practices, spiritual inquiry, and ecstatic, visionary experiences of many sorts. Although it may seem far-fetched to describe *Luxuria Superbia* as a form of self-writing on first reading, its title and the tablet medium’s explicit connection to prior Medieval, tablet-based spiritual writing practices, provide important context and clues to the game’s aims and insights. Admittedly, compared to contemporary memoirs and modes of self-writing, *Luxuria Superbia* features relatively little text, and amidst its multimodal visual, kinetic, and sonic environment, it is easy to argue that the evocative language is displaced by the gorgeous visual and aural elements of the work. Further, there is no narrative redescription of a self from the vantage of the present or well-circumscribed narrative personae, as one expects from modern, print-based forms of autobiography. Because the term “autobiography” has been “tied to specific formal expectations and a particular conception of the self,” Gur Zak notes, historians often skip the Middle Ages and modes of self-writing developed during this period (485). Zak underscores the distinct character and value of self-writing from the 12th through the 14th century as a spiritual activity carried

out in monasteries and, notably, one that often focused on writing as a performative mode of self-examination, an “examination of mundane, everyday experiences” performed (via its public writing) “in front of others” (486–87).

*Luxuria Superbia* can be understood to creatively draw upon such prior practices of self-writing in several crucial respects. Most obviously, perhaps, in the game’s exploration of tablet-based reading and writing as a means of shared, spiritual inquiry and experience. Yet also, I would suggest, in its awareness of how such spiritual inquiries, intersubjective exchanges, and orientations to the world, are often prescriptively shaped by acceptable material, social, and symbolic practices of reading and writing about the self and, thus, potentially transformed in relation to the latter, as well. *Luxuria Superbia* very subtly invites and guides its readers along twelve paths towards distinct kinds of ecstatic, climactic experiences. In this way, it explicitly approaches spiritual life as an exploratory practice, as “something to be cultivated” as it was in distinct strains of Medieval self-writing (Clark 470). It similarly involves readers in a practical kind of a “cultivation of self” focused on improving one’s behavior through this written self-examination. It imagines its touch-based self-writing as a means of facilitating and registering a process of self-transformation, as early strains of Medieval self-writing did, rather than as a retrospective “literary monument of the self,” the latter kind of self-writing more closely aligned with modern self-writing and autobiography, perhaps (Zak 487). Importantly, Medieval Latin spirituality and modes of self-writing involved “Christian practices of cultivating the self through reading, hearing, seeing, singing, meditation,” which “were often institutionalized and experienced communally, so as to experience the objects of the world—books, architecture, images, nature, other people—as leading one into the divine presence,” according to Anne L. Clark (465). In this context, self-writing was conceived in distinctly multimodal, intersubjective terms, grounded in worldly experiences and objects. As importantly, it envisioned “spirituality” less as a text than as a “practice that could be shaped, articulated, and constrained by the reading and writing of texts” (Clark 465).

Within this larger context of Medieval Latin spiritual writing, Clark stresses how influential religious women such as Elisabeth of Schönau developed distinct practices of self-writing that later became characteristic modes of spiritual writing for women. In Schönau's "visionary memoir," for instance, "desire, devotion, and prayer" are imagined as "tools for cultivating ecstasy" and serve as the basis for her prophetic teachings, which "portray a complicated world of human and divine agencies at work in the process of human seeking for divine presence" (9). Importantly, Schönau and other female mystics' spiritual writings and teachings about their visionary experiences were quite distinct from the kinds of regulated, prescriptive recommendations the Church provided for women recluses or the modes of self-writing practiced by monks (9). What differentiates the visionary memoir from other modes of tablet-based self-writing, and makes it particularly relevant to *Luxuria Superbia's* self-writing, is that Elisabeth of Schönau, who had lived in a monastery since adolescence, following a vision of a woman standing in the middle of a "wheel of great light," began "narrating her religious aspirations and articulating a spirituality in which distance between heaven and earth was radically diminished" (477). As Clark stresses, "Elisabeth's acknowledgment of the role of her desire—that is, her own agency—as well as her confidence in the objective reality of her extraordinary experience led to the creation of this new genre of spiritual literature, the 'visionary memoir'" (476). Notably, such visionary memoirs went directly against the kinds of spiritual practices then assigned to women as "humble handmaids to the Lord" (478) and they were shared in spite of increasing views that such experiences were the work of demons.

*Luxuria Superbia* situates its own cultivation and unfolding of spiritual experiences and understandings of the self amidst this longer, more variegated history of "multimodal practices" of cultivating, engaging, and surpassing the self through ecstatic shared experiences of multiple kinds. It comparatively reimagines the kinds of spiritual, material, bodily and symbolic touch, and the intersubjective relations that hand-held digital interfaces and modes of writing might encourage. Creatively elaborating on tablet-based self-writing in this prior context, *Luxuria Superbia's* digital self-writing focuses on conveying a similarly

experiential, spiritual pursuit of “the divine through extraordinary experience” (Clark 475). By sharing this practice of cultivating the self through its tablet-based, multimodal digital writing, the game elicits a similar kind of experience, knowledge, and communion on the part of its readers, though in distinctly 21st century, non-denominational terms.

Touching the center of one of the “flowers” on the main screen, players move through touch-based explorations of one of twelve differently colored and themed spaces. Movements through the subsequent, intertwining spaces are signaled by the dynamic, encircling movements of concentric shapes as they respond to one’s visual progression and spatialized touch. This progress is also figured in a tiny grayscale, spiral icon that appears in the corner of the screen, slowly filling in as one spends progressively more time in exploring one’s chosen flower. The purple flower, for instance, situates the reader among the stars, in a night sky, encouraging her to “touch my constellations,” or to “milk my way.” A teal blue flower, by contrast, evokes an underwater scene, stating, “ready for the plunge,” and encouraging readers to “feel deeper.” One’s perspective on the space each “flower” opens onto is indicated and altered by the winding, focusing, foreshortening, and lengthening of these circular shapes in direct response to one’s exploratory touching. The pace, path, length, pressure, and intensity of one’s touch elicit different sounds and alter the pacing of the music and visual scene. In addition, certain exploratory actions are reinforced, such as the touching of pink “buds” within these spaces, which increase one’s exploratory progress, or the touching of elongated white tears, which emit a dissonant sound, perhaps suggesting some kind of empathetic identification.

In these ways, *Luxuria Superbia* rewards readers at conscious and non-conscious levels according to their gameplay and, in particular, for the time they spend and the kinds of touch they extend to each “flower.” It encourages an experiential emphasis on the journey as a spiritual practice focused on self-exploration, self-meditation and self-cultivation in some ways similar to *Tale of Tales’* earlier interactive game, *The Path*, in which one *has* to stray from the path in order to succeed. In fact, if one rushes through an exploration of the flower and the ecstatic, explicitly climactic unfoldings and explosions that conclude the

exploration of each flower, the message, “oops that was fast” appears. This is followed by “can we try that again” and a visual depiction of a black cloud and the sound of thunder rather than, as with the successful completion of one’s exploratory journey, a “that was glorious” or “that was sublime,” a “thank you,” and a colored heart.

Each flowering path leads to some sort of ecstatic experience, to the folding or unfolding of boundaries between self and other, spiritual and material experience, or interior and exterior. Notably, these are all “spaces” that are typically mapped and conceived in Cartesian and Euclidian terms as distinctly bounded, quantifiable, absolute spaces.<sup>5</sup> Each path contains distinct music, tempo, coloring, and a series of worldly objects that jointly establish a particular spatial environment: the sea, a night sky, a park, or a church, or a remote outer space, for example. The worldly, material objects that intrude into and protrude from these apparently natural and biomorphic environments seem to suggest some of the obstacles that interfere with, or enticements that may further, one’s contemporary pursuit of these more ecstatic, erotic experiences of interconnection with ourselves, others, and with the world. The interior of the gold flower, perhaps evoking and circumnavigating a desire for wealth and power, features recurring miniature birthday cakes, office chairs (reminiscent of a *Windows* logo), and church steeples sprouting, upside down from the interior walls of its winding space and includes sounds of a fax machine ringing amidst its soundscape: “bring me power,” “feed me,” “be my light,” “file my cabinets” and “shine on me” are some of the phrases that call on readers. The interior of the teal blue flower, evoking the sea, features recurring anchors, a captain’s pipe, a life preserver, dolphins, ships and shells as it calls on its reader to “taste my salt,” “find my sunken treasure,” “immerse yourself in me.”

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5. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost describe Descartes’ definition of matter as “corporeal substance constituted of length, breadth, thickness; as extended, uniform, and inert... provided the basis for modern ideas of nature as quantifiable and measurable” and facilitated the absolute space of Euclidean geometry and mechanical, linear causality of Newtonian physics (7). See Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010) for an introduction to recent feminist science studies and new materialist rethinkings of this Cartesian legacy.

### (Re)orienting Lived Spaces

The initially perplexing intrusion of exterior worldly objects into these apparently interior, biomorphic “flowers,” or, alternately, into exterior, natural scenes of sea or sky is one of several ways in which *Luxuria Superbia* problematizes the rigid, binary distinctions currently used to absolutely differentiate interior and exterior as absolute spaces (and that similarly separate spiritual or material experiences into distinct spheres). It actively challenges their unavoidable, equally binary gendering and sexualization as well. When readers enter into several of these excessively feminine “flowers,” an explicitly exterior scene unfolds, such as a night sky or outer space, exploding with quite masculine rockets and satellites, confounding the typical gendering of these interior and exterior spaces and readers’ habitual orientations to them. Further, it is key to remember that while the “flowers” initially suggest that one is entering a feminine, or explicitly female, interior space, this view and the set of assumptions that may follow from it are called into question by the fact that these same flowers, when seen from the alternate side-view provided, as pillars of the temple, are explicitly masculine, phallic columns reaching up towards the sky. The game designers’ reference to these spaces as both “flowers” and “tunnels” reinforces the game’s efforts to confound and circumvent a typical binary gendering and sexing of spatial experiences and related oppositional, self-other orientations.

The intertwining of worldly, material objects and technologies within these biomorphic and natural environments seems to suggest their thorough entanglement, troubling readers’ and writers’ continued practices of habitually perceiving and re-solidifying reductive, gendered oppositions between culture and nature, technological and biological, masculine and feminine rather than registering more complex experiences and topographies. In *Luxuria Superbia* these organic and technological experiences, interior and exterior, private and public, worldly and otherworldly, inhabit the same, multileveled, circular space, however uncomfortably.

Reconceiving the lived spaces digital self-writing might open onto, as seen through the wider lens provided, in part, by Medieval visionary spiritual practices and their tablet-based self-writing, *Luxuria Superbia*

encourages readers to comparatively and critically perceive current gendered and sexualized spatial relations reinforced and re-realized by digital writing and game interfaces. It encourages readers to perceive modes of self and intersubjective touching they foreclose and might, instead, help facilitate as this game playfully attempts to do. The game's own twelve paths to an orgasmic, "sublime," "glorious" ecstasy continue the visionary memoir's cultivation of modes and practices of self that facilitate an embodied, personal sense of connection with a higher power, deeper experience, or other kind of "beyond," each providing its own symbolic and experiential guidance to readers to "pursue the possibilities of sensing the presence of the divine through extraordinary experience" (Clark 7). Spiritual writing such as female mystics' visionary memoir engaged and empowered women via its concerted blurring of established lines between heavenly and earthly, spiritual and material realms, and by reimagining everyday experiences as providing women direct, physical and emotional access to divine experience that they went on to share with others through their teachings. It is possible to read *Luxuria Superbia* as similarly interested in shifting the terms within which self and intersubjective experience is currently understood and facilitated. In both kinds of self-writing, acceptable interrelations between material, physical and spiritual realms and experiences, between interior and exterior, between subjective and intersubjective, between natural and technological are engaged as a means to recommend or register alternate orientations to self, others, and to lived space, more widely.

While there is no clear indication that *Tale of Tales* is referencing women's visionary memoirs in particular among modes of Medieval spiritual writing, reading the game alongside these similarly experimental women's practices of writing brings forward one additional, crucial dimension to *Luxuria Superbia*'s inquiries into how digital writing currently and might potentially impact and alter understandings of self-writing and the lived spaces these practices open onto. *Luxuria Superbia*'s creative rethinking of the spatiotemporal orientations and sexualized spaces of contemporary digital game interfaces is, similarly to Medieval women's visionary memoirs, a *tactical* engagement with digital writing and game spaces and their

largely unacknowledged, Cartesian spatiotemporal orientations and dynamics. This experimental game can be understood to (re)orient predominant understandings of self-writing, game space, and the kinds of lived spaces and intersubjective relation they typically open onto and resolidify through their organization of self-writing, gameplay, and acceptable modes of touching and feeling together. Notably, it is not that sexuality, spirituality, gender, or racially and culturally distinct orientations to one's embodied experience and to lived space are absent from other game spaces or digital self-writing. Instead, readers and players simply become (more or less happily) habituated to the predominant organizations and understandings of embodied subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and lived space that such paratextual practices, genres, and symbolic practices help to re-realize.

Digital writing, like prior print writing plays a pivotal role in rigidifying and calibrating distinct "orientations" to our bodies, to others, and to other lived spaces in phenomenologically, materially, and epistemologically distinct ways. As the philosopher Sara Ahmed has argued, women, queer, colonized, and other "out of place" subjects have "to secure a place that is not already given" (254). This is often accomplished by creatively intervening in precisely those scenes of writing, subjectivization, and social space that would otherwise silence, exclude, or eradicate these subjects and knowledges. In this context, *Luxuria Superbia* can be understood to (re)orient digital spaces of writing and the kinds of intersubjective experiences they more frequently encourage, attempting with its concentric, non-oppositional topographies to "turn the tables" on, and unsettle a "world that keeps things in place" (Ahmed 254) through precisely such rigidly gendered, sexualized, and racialized spatial orientations, modes of touching, and experiences of lived space. *Luxuria Superbia* reconceives these modes of self-writing and gameplay as a way to disrupt and make visible the gendered and sexualized confines of current practices of subjectivization, acceptable regimes of sensory experience, and the possibilities for touch, intersubjective experience, and ecstasy of various sorts, thereby encouraged or disallowed.

*Luxuria Superbia* enlists its exploratory play with self-writing in the service of a quite open-ended self-cultivation and intersubjective

exploration, which serves less as a means of intersubjective transcendence (as it did in Medieval spiritual writing) than as a way to comparatively cast into relief and to question, or unsettle predominant understandings of lived space and their Cartesian, binary, gendered, and heterosexualized terms. Within the game's concentric topography, with each of its "flowers" or levels depicted as one circular, spiral path of explorative inquiry that is likely embedded in a larger spiral (as recursive natural and technological processes usually are), there is no "higher level" to the game, really. This concentric topography subconsciously reinforces readers' sense that as one moves from one circular spiral to another, one is moving from the inside or outside of one embedded circle to another rather than moving along a grid of absolute spaces and progressing from a clearly delineated inside to outside, or within hierarchy of levels in bounded Euclidean space.

Intertwining interior and exterior spaces, processes of interiorization and exteriorization, and typically masculine or feminine movements or experiences, *Luxuria Superbia* encourages readers to attend to the points, places, moments, and kinds of touch digital writing practices might otherwise open onto. There is a lyrical voice throughout the game, as was the case with visionary memoirs with their similarly didactic dramatic personae guiding readers towards a similar cultivation of self. Further, both the visionary memoir and *Luxuria Superbia* are devoted to writing self in ways that are not confined to an understanding of self as an absolute space or to a self that is shored up and symbolically possessed through its retrospective writing, in contrast to conventional modern autobiography and much digital writing. The title's focus on the "sins" of lust and pride, in this context, seems to reference precisely the kinds of egoistic self writing typical of *Facebook*, of myopic modes of "whatever blogging" described by Jodi Dean, and characteristic of other writing via social media today, which are alternately attributed to either the exorbitant narcissism of women or men. Notably, this threat that language and self-writing might promote egoistic vanity, self-involvement, and overinvestment in the sensuousness "style" of one's language and aesthetics, distracting writers from their higher aims, has plagued practices of self-writing since Augustine's *Confessiones*. As Zak notes, self-writing engaged as an "ethical tool"

in the examination and cultivation of self “can also turn into desire to display one’s talents and win praise,” countering its initial purpose as a means of renouncing the self and all other worldly attachments in order to embrace a higher power (491).

Rather than chastising those apparently “guilty” of lust and self-pride or blasting prevalent modes of digital writing and game design that exhibit these, *Luxuria Superbia* creatively explodes the limits of these modes of self-desire, (re)orienting and unsettling them within its concentric, touch-based topography for self-writing. It focuses on opening up and onto other kinds of, perhaps more other-directed, or more intensely self-exploratory desire via these same digital technologies. One of the most striking flowers is furnished with a spattering of disturbing, floating eyes, or perhaps, *I*’s, along with territorial flags, both reminiscent of the possessive, egoistic modes of proprietary, white masculine self-identity prevalent today. These are, noticeably, accompanied, at times, by fluttering blue cupids’ legs and wings with which they seem to compete for readers’ attention.

By comparatively retracing and (re)orienting prior and emergent relays between tablet-based self-writing and the experiences of lived space these modes of self-writing might make way for, *Luxuria Superbia* reveals the distinct kinds of embodied, intersubjective self-experience these practices typically, and, it suggests, might potentially, cultivate. The game’s joyful, exuberant references to women’s sexuality and desire are hard to overlook and the theme of women’s touch immediately brings to mind French feminist Hélène Cixous’s explorations of the “erotogeneity” between women, as explored through an *écriture féminine*, or a writing “from and toward women.” Though for Cixous this is, as with this experimental game, an “erotogeneity of the *heterogenous*” (418–19, 426, emphasis mine).

Cixous’ proposed tactics of reorientation encouraged women to “write the self” as a “mode of claiming ownership of one’s body and one’s desires,” countering the “decensored relation of woman to her sexuality” (418). Cixous’ approach to women’s self-writing and sexuality is particularly relevant here as it is often reduced to and criticized for promoting a restrictive, essentialist understanding of women and their access, their proximity to the unconscious and to bodily life.

*Luxuria Superbia* might similarly be misperceived in such limiting terms as asserting an essentialist, substantialist, morphologically or culturally feminine desire and as reclaiming the digital interface and its privileged, touch-based modes of communication as—and on behalf of—woman and her essentially feminine modes of desire and experience. Auriea Harvey notes that one tag line they considered for the game was, “Ask your girlfriend how to play this game,” yet she goes on to note that in many ways these “tunnels” and the game is based more on male sex than female, reinforcing their efforts to unsettle such gendered binaries and affiliated understandings of sexual experience, spirituality, gaming, and touch.

While *Luxuria Superbia* participates in and extends the aims of such feminist and queer efforts to (re)orient hegemonic predominantly masculine, heterosexist spaces of writing, it explicitly does so *not* in the name of an essential femininity or feminine desire, which, crucially, would simply repeat the kinds of proprietary possessive modes of self it works so brilliantly to unfold through its writing practices. “The point” of the game, as Cixous argued about woman’s writing, “is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to “fly” (*voler*, meaning to fly or steal)” (424):

It’s no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down. (424)

*Luxuria Superbia*’s joyful, ecstatic, superabundant embrace of hand-held tables, digital interfaces and the multimodal interactions they enable is not carried out as a means to consolidate a uniquely feminine space or desire, or to reassert embodied, sensory modes or sensuous self-writing as more essentially or primarily feminine or primordially human than other print-based modes of self-writing (see fig. 3).

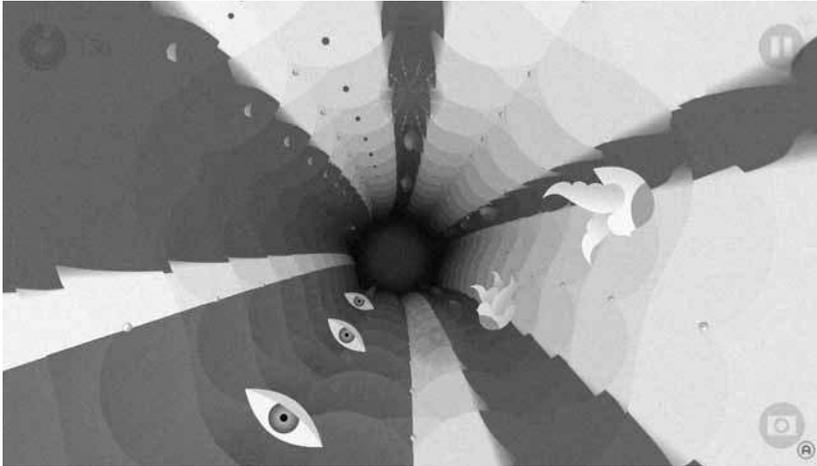


fig. 3. *Luxuria Superbia* screen shot of proprietary flags and cupids' wings.

### An (Im)properly Human Hand in Self-Writing

Critically participating in the recent resurgence of hand-held, mobile computer technologies and their touch-based digital interfaces, *Luxuria Superbia* underscores, instead, the necessity of comparatively, creatively, and critically exploring the possibilities *and* limits of digital writing practices and interfaces, and, particularly, their “return to the hand,” rather than simply celebrating or maligning the tendencies of digital media technics by suggesting they enable us to be more or less properly or essentially human. In *Small Tech: The Culture of Digital Tools*, Byron Hawk, David M. Rieder, and Ollie Oviedo extend French anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan’s view that “the twentieth-century is producing a return to the techniques of the hand,” arguing that

[h]aving been separated from the body through the development of writing, the hand is being (re)integrated into a new context. Rather than being an extension of the human body, the hand becomes a small technology in its own right, with the ability to enter into material combinations with other digital devices and material events to create new possibilities for communication and action. (xiv)

Quite usefully, they stress that this (re)turn to the hand in digital scenes of writing, and the multimodal, touch-based modes of expression it unleashes, is transformative, once again, rather than evidencing a straightforward return to a more originary human handwriting, or, I would add, a necessarily more feminine, embodied, multisensory writing. In fact, readers of electronic literature and games, digital narratologists, and theorists working in multimodal studies now realize how digital interfaces, such as that at work in *Luxuria Superbia*, frequently generate a “doubled experience” that allows for both “an immersive narrative” and foregrounds “the physical context of reading,” an awareness of both the reader’s bodily experience and also of the body of the screen or digital interface, at a meta-level (Gibbons 7).

As may already be obvious from the description above, many of the game’s short lyrical phrases play upon and recombine quite familiar, even tired sexual innuendos, gendered and sexualized spatial metaphors and interiorizing and exteriorizing movements. While this serves to bring the lyrical interface’s and the readers’ desire to the foreground of the game in quite amusing and delicious, unexpected ways, it is often also quite tongue-in-cheek. As a result, these immersive explorations of desire, ecstatic touch, lived space, and varieties of intersubjective knowledge effectively immerse *and* distance the reader from these familiar conceits and the affective experiences they play upon. This raises further questions about the gendered and sexualized binary frameworks in which subjectivities, intersubjective possibilities for communion, and acceptable spatiotemporal orientations to lived spaces—biological, physical, social, material—are currently experienced, imagined, and, in this case, unsettled. In fact, if one considers that one may, in fact, be talking to a gendered, sexualized, cheeky, lyrical *interface* throughout the game, then almost all of readers’ assumptions about touch, intersubjectivity, and feeling together are further disoriented by their unfolding within this unavoidable, technical context. In this regard, *Luxuria Superbia* seems to acknowledge digital writing technologies and interfaces, in and of themselves, as crucial, unpredictable agents in the current confounding of prior print-based oppositions of inside and outside, private and public, feminine and masculine, subjective and intersubjective, human and nonhuman that the game celebrates and comments on in these unique ways.

Reading *Luxuria Superbia* as one recent kind of digital self-writing illustrates how such comparative digital literary experiments move current discussions of digital writing and, particularly, quite polarizing readings of the preeminence of touch, and more “feminine,” embodied, affective, multimodal modes of communication in digital writing, beyond their current frame. These tendencies of digital writing are often read in progressive, enabling terms as a restorative, enhancing “return” to the agency and intentionality of the hand or a return to the feminine “body” of the reader and writer. This idea of the digital medium in greater proximity to women’s bodies (i.e., as a matrix, or womb) and/or able to facilitate and re-privilege modes of communication previously aligned with the feminine and devalued has informed cyberfeminist works, feminism and gender studies, science studies, and new media studies of digital writing in multiple, complex, and often quite insightful, tactical ways.<sup>6</sup> Yet in contemporary discussions of digital writing, when framed in this way, the embodied, hand-held, sensory-rich, interactive, affectively thick, multimodal dimensions of digital writing and media tend to be either celebrated or maligned *in toto*, depending on one’s perspective. Unfortunately, both views continue to evaluate digital writing practices in terms of their proximity to a more fully or properly human subject, as Heidegger does. On the one hand, digital writing technologies are interpreted and celebrated as a return to a more primary, feminine body that has been actively repressed by print cultures and their Cartesian rationalism, or, alternately, they are interpreted as overrunning the individualizing, intentional human handwriting with an improperly, inhuman type-writing, which, in Heidegger’s terms, subjects the unique, human character of the hand to de-individuation and indiscriminate positioning within disturbing, mechanized and feminized masses. Because proprietary modes of self-writing remain central to the social differentiation of “properly” human subjects, opposing an “authentic,” individuating relation to technology

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6. See Sadie Plant. *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (1997) for a representative example of this cyberfeminist rhetoric about digital materialities and women’s privileged, biological relation to these digital textualities. As a useful counter to this broader tendency, Laura U. Marks’ *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (2002) situates its prescient inquiries into the growing preeminence of touch fully in the context of experimental media practices in video, film, and interactive media while equally attending to gendering and sexuality.

(“handwriting” for Heidegger) to its dangerously standardized, feminized foil (a literal “type” writing), it is crucial to inquire into the renewed emphasis on hand-held technologies of writing as these impact this uneven scene of writing subjects, as *Luxuria Superbia* and other works do via these comparative methods, rather than to simply embrace or oppose this renewed emphasis on techniques of the (im)properly human hand.

It is increasingly clear that if one takes into consideration the recursive, dynamic relations that digital writing technologies, like other technics before them, involve us in, then relying on a distinction between more or less properly human modes of “handwriting,” misconstrues the character of such media change and how it reenters existing modes of subjectivization and experiences and practices of lived space in expected and unexpected ways. Avoiding this lure, *Luxuria Superbia*, like other feminist and queer writing practices that tactically engage and (re)orient writing spaces and the technics they help co-realize to ulterior ends, do so not to (re)possess these spaces in the predominant, masculine, proprietary mode, or to render these spaces more feminine or more embodied, as is frequently assumed. *Luxuria Superbia* and an increasing number of similarly hybrid digital literary writing experiments, instead, disorient and reorient digital writing spaces in order to reveal, or perhaps even unearth, unnoticed alternatives to predominant modes of self-writing.<sup>7</sup> They help to register how differentiations between interior and exterior, self and other, gendered private and public spaces are productively complicated by digital writing technologies and interfaces as they entwine readers in a series of ongoing embedding and embedded relations. *Luxuria Superbia* reveals how attending to the ongoing, longstanding contestation and interplay between sensory regimes and associated writing regimens to which writing practices, media, and other technics of lived space are central may help destabilize current, hegemonic practices and generate other experiences of lived space that are perhaps more interesting and important to acknowledge.

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7. Serge Bouchardon, Kevin Carpentier, and Stéphanie Spénlé’s “Toucher” as well as Serge Bouchardon and Vincent Volckaert’s web-based interactive narrative, *Déprise/Loss of Grasp/Perdersi/Desenchufe*, are two digital literary works that raise a related set of questions to these, though using quite different techniques. Also see Marfa Mencía, “Another Kind of Language,” “Birds Singing Other Birds’ Songs,” and her recent “Transient Self-Portrait.”

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## BIOGRAPHY

Laura Shackelford is Associate Professor of English at the Rochester Institute of Technology. She is the author of *Tactics of the Human: Experimental Technics in American Fiction*, University of Michigan Press *digitalculturebooks* series

(Dec. 2014), and publishes articles on comparative literary and media studies, contemporary American fiction, digital language practices, bioinformatics, technics, systems thinking, and feminist science studies.