

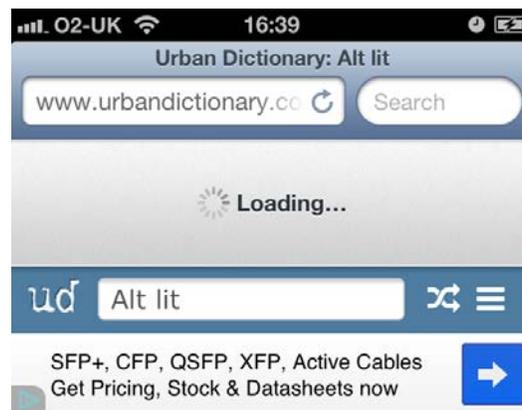
My Latest Article is a PDF

By Sonja Todd / The Millions / <http://www.themillions.com/2013/08/my-latest-article-is-a-pdf.html>

This is a PDF. It's one of the new trendy forms of creative expression. It has been around longer than the MiniDisc. The PDF is an early nineties thing. Ergo it's trendy to use it now.

Powerpoint presentations were the last new trendy form of creative expression after they got a [pecha kucha](#) restyle and became a respected go-to format for alternative lectures (alt lec?).

When my boyfriend told me to read [a hot new newspaper article about alt lit](#) (online obviously) by Dan Holloway, it talked about a new literature "making the digital world not just its medium but its subject". The novel was still, though, the transitional traditional object that lent enough validation to this new movement that the newspaper was willing to cover it. The novel is still the idealized portable document format. The novel, *Taipei* by Tao Lin, was the article's hook, and the porthole, to alt lit.



Alt lit isn't defined yet.

↻ Random Word



Alt lit: not even defined by Urban Dictionary yet

In a [previous article over at futurebook.net](#), Dan Holloway says alt lit "deals like no other form of writing with life in the 21st century digital West". HOORAY. This is what I/we/you've been waiting for. Not characters in novels talking in txt spk, but actually what's going on in our heads when there's so much internet in there. Described in words. And so. I expected books whose chapters are broken into bytes, to be scattered across our digital devices like narrative space dust, to be inhaled via touchscreen buttons. There was some of that. One of the most fun places to read alt lit is on [The Newer York's Electric](#)

[Encyclopedia of Experimental Literature](#) where you throw options into a content graph to find poems and prose hidden behind images. The other is Tumblr. You can also look deeper into alt lit via the [alt lit players list](#) put together by [@altlitgossip](#) on Twitter, and read some great poems about life in the digital age. Many of these alt lit authors have under 100 Twitter followers. I love this. I feel like an adult sneaking into a teenager's bedroom. I know I'm embarrassing it by even writing about it here, but alt lit is what I want to read. It's what I've been waiting to read.

Music waits for waves, film waits for movements, literature waits for forms. Has there been a new form of writing since chick lit or the New Puritans? It feels like it's all been about publishing and not what is being published. There are a surprisingly small number of waves in any artform. Wikipedia lists 37 film movements and 39 literary movements. Film was only just invented, we've had words for what feels like forever.

Style and content. That's all I want.

One of the formats which alt lit comes in is the PDF format. It's the same format as normal lit. I shouldn't even be saying "PDF format" because the F in PDF stands for "format." So I'm being redundant. Like old technology. Even writing this as a Google Doc seems redundant when things like [SimpleBooklet](#) are scaleable and shareable (but unable to print or produce a PDF without mangling a careful design (which only looks careful thanks to templates, which know which shades of dark grey are tasteful for body text. In case you're wondering, it's this shade. The one you're reading. #646362.)). (Not an emoticon.)

This is not a history of the PDF. The PDF was always the way to solidify your work. Like someone just beginning to make their way in the world and dictating how the tastes of this current moment in time will be remembered by generations future, the PDF is 22 years old. It needed to exist mainly because of the tight border control exhibited by different versions of Microsoft Word and other software, which wouldn't allow documents through their gates without battering them into a spew of letters and numbers. A long-form haiku.

Adobe stepped in like an incompetent quango to administer the saving and opening of PDFs, but like anti-virus software became something of a virus in itself, elbowing in to open as many documents as it could, putting out its little red Acrobat triangle like a driver's flimsy plastic stop sign. This accident is MINE, step back. Like Microsoft, Adobe Acrobat didn't have the enabler attitude we've come to expect from technology. Our technology. Technology that has subjugated itself to us, and the thanks it gets is our *shut up, let me get on, don't reveal your inner workings, keep your interface on.*

The PDF, I said, was a way to solidify your work. To rasterize, to merge layers, to save as jpg. Its current popularity could be seen as the paranoid end of the spectrum of our reaction to the multiplicity of devices. In opposition to the free and open new scaleable mediums which, like a diplomatic middle child, squeeze or stretch themselves to suit whatever screen or software you're using. The PDF is more the controlling parent. It has tight reins on content. It bullies your screen and software into displaying things exactly as it presents them.

So, the PDF as one of the chosen formats of the dawners of the new literature. I get it. I thought it would be the app, but I get it. The app is too CD-ROMy. The PDF is democratic (probably more so than that other early nineties format for content, the zine, which required access to a photocopier, and is the existing cultural format I would most closely layer PDF alt lit over.) At the library it's cheaper to use the computer than the photocopier.

[One of the first alt lit PDFs I looked at](#) had a long string of nacho crisp emoticons across the page (or, since crisps don't emote, icons). A whole packet of them on repeat.

PDF PDF PP PDF PDF PPF PPr PFr Pr

Here's the interactive bit. While writing this PDF, which I initially did with pen and paper before typing it into a Google Document, printing it to my desktop as a PDF and emailing it to a website, before them uploading it and you opening it on some kind of screen, none of which has yet happened at the time of typing (this bit wasn't in the pen and paper draft). Back when it was just pen and paper, I noticed a funny thing. When you write the word PDF a lot, it becomes difficult to form the letters. Try it yourself. Write 'PDF' on repeat, and you'll get something like what's happening above. Words as broken crisps. The PDF as pen-twister. Its letters are all slightly alike, a straight stroke down the left then a double hitch. Get a pen and paper and try it now.

Congratulations. You just wrote alt lit. You're part of a worldwide handwritten PDF poem.

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You can't edit a PDF or make one on your smartphone without a trawl through an app store. Yet there's something in it. From the moment I read about alt lit and cracked open a few PDFs, I wanted to create one. My latest article is a PDF. A congealed bit of technology, something we're trying while we wait for literature's saviour format, not an app, not a Kindle download, but some new form yet to be discovered, being discovered by alt lit, being hidden by PDFs. A form which affects content. Here's my stone tablet. Did you get a pen and paper yet?