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Third-Generation Electronic Literature

Leonardo Flores

The history of electronic literature is inextricably tied to the history of computing, networking, and their social adoption. As computers become increasingly powerful, miniaturized, versatile, user friendly, affordable, and ubiquitous, so does their user base. As digital networks have grown from local networks to private dial-up networks to the open World Wide Web to corporate social media networks, the scale of digital communication and audiences has grown exponentially. Assuming that a fixed percentage of computer and network users will seek to creatively explore the possibilities for writing offered by computers, one would expect to see an level of growth in the production and publication of electronic literature.

But is electronic literature keeping up with this explosive growth of digital media users? What if it is, but in a way that is unrecognizable by the field as currently defined? What is electronic literature's place in a world of ubiquitous computing, massive user bases, and even larger audiences? What is electronic literature's cultural reach? How might it achieve mainstream recognition? To begin to answer these questions, this chapter describes a paradigm shift that opens the door to a third generation of electronic literature.

I define electronic literature as a writing-centered art that engages the expressive potential of electronic and digital media. Even though it has origins in oral culture, particularly poetry, literature as an artistic tradition and field of study has been shaped for centuries by writing and print technologies.

Therefore, broader forms of communication, such as narrative, spoken and sign language, audio and video recordings of performances, purely visual comics, and video games are of less interest from an e-literary perspective because they are not using alphabetic or even asemic writing. An essential component needs to be the artistic engagement of written language in digital media. So even though the programming code that powers a digital work or video game is written, and is of interest, unless it is performing a kind of code poetry its use of language is functional and not artistic. Electronic literature, therefore, explores writing in electronic and digital media, which integrate computation, multimedia integration, interactivity through a variety of input devices, networked data, and digital culture itself. As it grows and matures, digital culture itself is an increasingly important influence in the creation of electronic literature, especially in its third generation.

The first efforts towards historicizing electronic literature were by N. Katherine Hayles in her keynote address for the 2002 Electronic Literature: State of the Arts Symposium at UCLA, the concept was published in “Electronic Literature: What is it?” (2004), and elaborated in *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008). She established the concept of first-generation electronic literature and she defined it as pre-web, text-heavy, link-driven, mostly hypertext, that still operated with many paradigms established in print. She defined the second generation from 1995 onward, as web-based and incorporating multimedia and interactivity. After some of the critical conversation around her notion of generations, she renamed the first generation as classic and the second as contemporary electronic literature (2008). And this was accurate, for the moment, because the paradigm shift I will describe was barely getting started.

Christopher Funkhouser, with *Prehistoric Digital Poetry* (2007), elaborated and reaffirmed Hayles’ generational formulation, especially of first-generation electronic literature, showing that it wasn’t as text-driven as initially understood and that it had a variety of multimedia and kinetic works. He and others have continued to explore the richness of the first generation. With *New Directions in Digital Poetry* (2012), Funkhouser picks up where the previous book left off (around 1995) and makes a series of case studies that span about fifteen years of web-based digital poetry. In these case studies, he maps out some of the most important developments in digital poetry, showing how writers from the first generation continued to develop their work in the second generation or contemporary period. And while this book concluded with a nod toward some of the emerging platforms of the time: social media networks, mobile platforms, and web APIs, its conceptualization of the field was aligned with Hayles’ notion of contemporary electronic literature.

It is time to update the historical model to account for these emerging platforms and the practices they encourage. To begin with, we must leave behind distinctions like classic and contemporary because contemporary

is an open-ended concept that needs to be continuously adapted when there's a shift in practices. I propose defining three generations (or waves) of electronic literature. The first one, much as defined by my predecessors, consists of pre-web experimentation with electronic and digital media. The second generation begins with the web in 1995 and continues to the present, consisting of innovative works created with custom interfaces and forms, mostly published in the open web. The third generation, starting from around 2005 to the present, uses established platforms with massive user bases, such as social media networks, apps, mobile and touchscreen devices, and web API services. This third generation coexists with the previous one and accounts for a massive scale of born-digital work produced by and for contemporary audiences for whom digital media has become naturalized. Each generation builds upon previous and contemporary technologies, access, and audiences, to develop works and poetics that are characteristic of their generational moment.

The first generation of electronic literature is characterized by a few pioneering works that emerged between 1952 and 1995. For most of this period, people had limited access to computers, resulting in a small number of practitioners, most of whom didn't have a clear concept that what they were creating was electronic literature. In the first few decades, only computer scientists and academics in universities and technical staff in the private industry, producers in film, television, radio studios that had access to expensive tools that could be used to create electronic literature. As word processors, personal computers, and gaming consoles arrived in the late 1970s and became popularized in from the 1980s onwards, access to computers expanded to include hobbyists and middle-class populations in the most developed countries around the world, production of electronic literature began to grow. This itself could be considered a mini-generational shift within this first generation because of the leap in user base, with an according explosion in production and reception. During the first half of this period production tools were very limited in their capabilities. Programmers initially used punch cards and early programming languages were very close to machine language, but over time have become more user friendly. BASIC and Pascal, for example, are closer to natural language and were featured prominently in the first decade of personal computing. Early software was frequently encoded in ROM storage and was used for very specific tasks, such as word processing and gaming cartridges. More versatile software, such as HyperCard, Storyspace, and INFORM, along with increasingly powerful media editing and production tools emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s. Distribution of electronic literature mostly happened in physical media, through magazines like *Byte*, which came with disks bundled with print matter to be sold in newsstands, bookstores, and other brick-and-mortar establishments. The audience for electronic literature was therefore limited, even though interactive fiction was very

popular in gaming markets, and Eastgate Systems enjoyed mainstream attention and international circulation through the book market.

The rise of the World Wide Web brought about a major paradigm shift and growth in the production and circulation of electronic literature, initiating a second generation of works. Because growing numbers of people have personal computers and internet access, the number of practitioners increases accordingly, and the ease of publication has led to a massive amount of original work entering circulation through the web. Practitioners are programmers, people with personal computers, web artists, and developers, writers and artists collaborating with programmers, and multimedia authoring software users. Flash and Director, for example, empowered a generation of authors and artists to create electronic literature, even if they didn't have a high level of programming skill to begin with. As more varied and user-friendly tools and programming languages develop—such as HTML, JavaScript, CSS, DHTML, ActionScript, Python, and Ruby—the barrier to entry becomes more accessible for people to create electronic literature. Software for editing audio, video, and images continue to develop, and multimedia authoring software, such as Director and Flash, rise and fall as they become obsolete. The second generation of electronic literature circulates primarily through the open web, through author home pages, web-based 'zines, collections, and other resources. The audience for electronic literature is growing and academia has been a powerful engine for expanding this audience through courses, presentations, exhibitions, conferences, leading to the growth of the field.

The third generation of electronic literature, because it is based on social media networks and widely adopted platforms and apps, both the production and audiences are massive. If you count image macro memes as a kind of electronic literature, as I do, then the numbers of works produced and circulated are in the millions. The number of practitioners is equally enormous, numbering in the thousands, millions if you count image macro meme makers. The increasing demand for digital skills in the workplace has resulted in growing numbers of programmers, designers, digital producers, coders, and web developers. A portion of these highly skilled folks produce electronic literature in the second-generation mode, as well as third-generation work. The huge numbers come from users of multimedia authoring software—such as Instagram, Snapchat, Imgflip, and apps that allow you take or upload a picture, put language in it, create an animation, and share it. Even when they are not self-consciously producing literature—societal concepts of literature are still dominated by the genres and modes developed in the print world—a huge amount of people have used these tools to produce writing that has stepped away from the page to cross over into electronic literature territory, and it's a crucial move. Whether they know it or not, they are producing third-generation electronic literature. The software tools at their disposal are varied and increasingly lower the

barrier to entry, with programs like Twine, Unity, JavaScript Libraries, simple and free publication platforms (like Cheap Bots, Done Quick!, and Philome.la), and social media apps like Vine, Instagram, Snapchat, GIPHY, and others. Many of the electronic literature genres that emerged in the first and second generations continue in the third—such as bots, electronic poetry, videopoetry, hypertext fiction, mobile and locative works, virtual reality, augmented reality—and are revitalized as they find new forms in the third generation with Twine games, Twitter bots, Instagram poetry, GIFS, and image macro memes.

Bots are a good case to examine how these generational divides manifest across the same e-lit genre. The first chatterbot, ELIZA, was developed by Joseph Weizenbaum from 1964 to 1966 at MIT, followed by PARRY at Stanford University in 1972. Access to these bots was extremely limited, so if you wanted to interact with either of these bots, you needed to travel to MIT, arrange for a session, and sit down at the teletype machines prepared for them to do so. Interestingly enough, the first conversation between these two bots was arranged in 1972 using ARPANET during the International Conference on Computer Communications in Washington, DC. But even this was a bit of a technical feat at the time and access to computers and networks was mostly limited to computer scientists at elite universities, corporations, and some branches of the government. Bot development was carried out by specialists interested in achieving computer science benchmarks, such as passing the Turing Test, and later on by programmers who developed parsers for Interactive Fiction and MUDs, and chatbot developers that compete for AI awards like the Loebner Prize (established in 1990) and those who develop chatbots for phone-answering systems and personal computers.

In the second generation, many of these first-generation bots were implemented on the web, providing widespread access to them. We also have increasingly sophisticated bots that serve as characters in interactive fiction and video games, such as Emily Short's "Galatea" (2000) and "Façade" (2005) by Michael Mateas and Daniel Stern, respectively. Part of what characterizes these works is that audiences can find the works online and need to install the works on their computers to launch the game environments and interfaces needed to interact with these bots. These bots posed a challenge for audiences, who need to figure out how to successfully interact with them and understand their programmed personalities for different narratives to unfold. A characteristic of second-generation works is that authors like to create new or customized environments and interfaces for readers to experience the works, as is the case in these works.

Artistic and literary bots have been relatively rare during the first and second generations, but the third generation with its social media networks and API services has renewed and expanded this e-literary genre. These bots have gone beyond the chatbot subgenre to be autonomous generative e-lit

works that are presented as human or personified animals and concepts and publish their content in Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, Mastodon, or other social media networks. The techniques for creating them are not very different from bots in earlier generations, but rather than creating custom datasets, programmers are pulling or processing content from API services or using user-friendly platforms like the Twinery-powered Cheap Bots Done Quick! (CBDQ). Rather than being standalone custom experiences, these bots leverage social media networks as contexts and spaces to develop audiences. For example, when you are on Twitter, a bot might react artistically to something you posted, such as @HaikuD2 or @Pentametrone, which detect tweets that could be cut into haiku or happen to be written in iambic pentameter, respectively. Most of these bots are opt-in, which means you can follow it, though someone you follow may retweet or like bot output, which then is inserted into your Twitter stream. Because following bots is a way of interspersing art into your social media stream, and because people use social media networks for a variety of reasons, bots have become increasingly popular, developing audiences of hundreds of thousands of followers and more. And while there are more people with the programming skills necessary for bot-making, services like CBDQ and Zach Whalen's SSBot tool have lowered the barrier to entry, which magnifies the production of works in this vein. It is telling that CBDQ currently has over 7,000 active bots in Twitter, and that the total audience for bot output is in the millions—a huge growth in readership from first- and second-generation works.

Another electronic literature genre or modality where a generational shift helps bring new works into focus is kinetic texts. Álvaro Seiza's 2018 dissertation, "setInterval (): Time-Based Readings of Kinetic Poetry," traces a history of kinetic poetry across the first and second generations, offering meticulous and timely readings of both the surface and code portions of the kinetic poems, and covers works from "Roda Lume" (1968) by E. M. Melo e Castro to works as recent as "∕ [Total Runout]" (2015) by Ian Hatcher, and iOS apps created by Jason Edward Lewis, Bruno Nadeau, and Jörg Piringer. While this was not the focus of Seiza's dissertation, it would have been enriched by a look outside of the experimental tradition to explore the widespread use of kinetic writing occurring with lyric videos and kinetic typography in Vimeo and YouTube and animated GIFs circulating massively in sites like Tumblr, GIPHY, and other social media networks and recognizing how kinetic works are deployed differently in apps and publications designed for touchscreen devices.

First-generation works are very clearly recognizable: Melo e Castro needed a television production studio to produce and air his work, Eduardo Kac used an LED scrolling screen to create "Não!" for an installation in 1982, and bpNichol distributed his 1984 Applesoft BASIC suite of poems "First Screening" in floppy disks. Second-generation works published on

the web, such as “Project for Tachistoscope” (2005) by William Poundstone and “El Poema Que Cruzó el Atlántico” by María Mencía require readers to visit websites to read the works and have a learning curve in which readers figure out how to operate and experience the works. “Hearts and Minds” by Roderick Coover and Scott Rettberg is a generative and immersive cinematic work that is too computationally demanding to be published online and therefore circulates in documentation videos and installations. All these works including early Flash and Director work by Jim Andrews, Alan Bigelow, Christine Wilks, Stephanie Strickland and Cynthia Lawson Jaramillo, Megan Sapnar, Ingrid Ankerson, Andy Campbell, Jason Nelson, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, and other second-generation works seek formal innovation that is aligned with the poetics of Modernism, or what Jessica Pressman described as Digital Modernism in her 2014 book. Mark Wollaeger and Kefin J. H. Dettmar’s preface to her book not only offers a concise definition but does so in connection with the notion of generations.

“Digital Modernism” is deployed here by Jessica Pressman, the first critic to elaborate the term, to describe second-generation works of electronic literature that are text based, aesthetically difficult, and ambivalent in their relationship to mass media and popular culture. Such works offer immanent critiques of a contemporary society that privileges images, navigation, and interactivity over complex narrative and close readings.

(Pressman 2014: ix)

I propose that Jessica Pressman’s formulation of digital modernism is not only a distinctive feature of first- and second-generation electronic literature but also that third-generation works reject or are unaware of this aesthetic of difficulty, and can be thought of as postmodern electronic literature. Third-generation kinetic works write language in animated GIFs, in apps like Snapchat and Instagram, and write kinetic typography in videogames, lyric videos, and other multimedia productions without necessarily seeking formal innovation or a highbrow literary experience. I would describe these works as works of e-literary popular culture that seek ease of access and spreadability (to reference Henry Jenkins’ term in *Spreadable Media*), and are aligned with the poetics of contemporary digital culture.

Some contemporary electronic literature authors began in the second generation and have shifted to the third or produce work in both modalities. Alan Bigelow, for example, began producing e-lit works in Flash, each of which had a unique interface designed for the work. This is very much in the Modernist tradition of free verse, where content determines form. When the end of Flash became clear, however, Bigelow shifted his practice to creating works with HTML5, JavaScript, and CSS with a simplified form that is designed to work well with both computers and touchscreen devices of all

shapes and sizes. His recent Coover Award-winning work “How to Rob a Bank” is basically a slide show, and as a user that is expected of you is to advance from one slide to the next, with no need for instructions beyond turning on your sound. Bigelow’s third-generation works all use this and other well-established digital formats, with a parallel move to the return to closed form in postmodern poetry.

Another transition from second- to third-generation practices is evident in the work of authors that develop work for popular platforms, such as iOS and Android. Jason Edward Lewis and Bruno Nadeau’s Coover Award-winning *P.o.E.M.M. Cycle*, initially tapped into a second-generation poetics by being created for large-screen installations equipped with touchscreen technology because they were challenging audience expectations with innovative poetic form. When implemented in iOS, however, these works and their form feel less innovative in terms of the gestural vocabulary that users of iOS and Android touchscreen devices are already accustomed to. Poetically, each poem is creating its own form—a second-generation Modernist move—but they’re more accessible to the massive audiences that Apple has cultivated for their devices. Increasing numbers of e-lit authors, such as Samantha Gorman, Jörg Piringer, Amaranth Borsuk, Ian Hatcher, and Katherine Norman are interesting bridge cases, bringing second-generation sensibilities and poetics while developing for third-generation platforms and the interactivity training that audiences bring to the device. Andy Campbell, Kate Pullinger, Mez Breeze, Caitlin Fisher, and their collaborators do a parallel move by creating works in increasingly popular virtual reality environments.

Going to where the audiences are and building upon their knowledge of the platform is a key characteristic of third-generation electronic literature works. Second-generation authors frequently create custom environments and interfaces, subverting audience expectations and frequently featuring instructions to read their works. For example, Netprov works frequently use existing platforms—such as Twitter, Facebook, or Amazon’s rating and customer commenting capabilities—to create a kind of literary graffiti. Authors like Rob Wittig, Mark Marino, and others use popular platforms to create literary works. Another kind of third-generation social media performance is characters or bots based on fictional works, hit shows, celebrities, or politicians, such as @WernerTwertzog and @KimKierkegaard. These performances attract large audiences, which authors can often find a way to monetize.

Third-generation works are less interested in originality (digital modernist characteristic), and more willing to create remixes, derivations, copies, and outright plagiarism of works, frequently adding personal touches and customizations. For example, Nick Montfort created “Taroko Gorge” in 2009, inventing a poetry generator specifically for his nature poem in second-generation fashion, but those of us who remixed it after him were not inventing a form, we were adapting, appropriating, even erasing the

original works as a third-generation move. Memes are another example of this type of postmodern digital poetics. Language-driven memes, such as image macro memes may have existed formally in print culture, but have become a central type of cultural production in digital media, particularly as deployed in social media networks. I like to think of image macro memes as a kind of gateway drug into e-lit, because all the people creating them are taking a step away from the page: they're writing on images, sometimes moving images, and that alone is a step toward a deeper engagement with digital media. Memes are frequently not original, nor do they wish to be, yet they get expanded, adapted, forked, combined with other memes, reframed, parodied, become self-referential, go viral, go dormant, return, and are a great example of how a massive amount of people are writing and reading a kind of electronic literature that is probably looked down upon by those committed to a digital modernist poetics. This is why a new generation is key to mark a paradigm shift in the field.

The field of electronic literature began in the first generation but was formed and grew in academia during the second generation, and its poetics guide its production, reception, circulation, and economics. The web—the defining platform for the second generation—disrupted established markets for the circulation of music, writing, video, and to a lesser extent the visual arts by creating a powerful gift economy and taking the means of production away from publishers and labels to return them to creators. For this generation, the main way to profit from electronic literature was by developing cultural capital in academia, the art world, and other spaces, advancing the field through innovation while connecting to literary and artistic traditions. Second-generation electronic literature writers and artists tend to make a living not through the sale of works, but through day jobs, artist residencies, academic positions, invited performances and gallery exhibitions, commissioned work, and other related practices. A poetics of innovation and aesthetic difficulty go hand in hand with the economics of the prestige and cultural capital market. As Matthew G. Kirschenbaum noted in his ELO 2017 keynote: “I submit ... that difficulty, seriousness, and conceptual density are all characteristics that have served to gain e-lit a firm institutional purchase in academia, where difficulty and seriousness are rewarded” (5). And academia helps circulate e-lit through courses, criticism, publications, exhibitions, digital repositories, and more, even as it has struggled to directly monetize such circulation.

Third-generation works respond to new markets, platforms, and monetization possibilities and have developed without the need for academia and its validation. Poets who publish first on Instagram, such as Rupī Kaur, Lang Leav, and Robert M. Drake, build massive audiences and then publish books of poetry that reach unprecedented sales numbers, as Kathi Inman Berens demonstrated in her ELO 2019 presentation, “Populist Modernism: Printed Instagram Poetry and the Literary Highbrow.” Lyle Skains, in “Not Sold in Stores: The Commercialization Potential of Digital Fiction”

discusses some alternate commercialization options for digital fiction, such as Twine games and walking sims sold through the Steam store, webcomics and fanfiction sold in print, and detailing some of her own efforts in creating and selling hypertext publications in Kindle format. Some of the new commercialization models available for third-generation works that achieve good circulation includes crowdsourcing platforms like Patreon, advertising revenue, and sales through app stores and in-app purchases.

An aesthetic of difficulty would undermine the very spreadability and commercialization paradigms that help third-generation works thrive. And as Kirschenbaum provocatively stated in his keynote, “maybe what matters is the continued growth and diversification of an e-lit that is not dependent on whatever contradictions or complications attend its status in relation to an academic valuation of the avant garde” (Kirschenbaum 2018: 7). This provocation was an important catalyst for my own formulation of a new generation of electronic literature because I recognize the need to account for the explosive growth and diversification of e-literary digital writing practices beyond what is practiced and studied by the ELO community.

An important example of a third-generation work that went “viral” in 2018 is “Lazy Cat” by txtstories, reaching over 68 million views on Facebook and over 31 million views on YouTube. The story is presented as a video capture of a text messaging session between a cat and its owner, after the cat informs that the stove was left on (see Figure 1).

If we were to think of this in terms of a second-generation work, it is not a particularly sophisticated piece. From a literary point of view, it’s an amusing

FIGURE 1 Screen capture of “Lazy Cat.”

story that personifies a cat and does a nice job of capturing its personality as expressed through a texting conversation. It's a video produced using some sort of messaging software and screen-recording technology and it isn't particularly innovative from a technical standpoint. However, its popularity comes from its humorous narrative, its leveraging cat culture, and by how effectively it uses the limited texting vocabulary they have at their disposal: text in all caps, lowercase, tactical use of punctuation, and hashtags. These videos are circulated on Facebook and YouTube and use these social media networks not only as publication platforms but also generate revenue using their advertising services. The Los Angeles-based company that produces txtstories, New Form, describes itself as follows:

New Form is an entertainment studio for TV and digital content that redefines how stories are developed, packaged and distributed. New Form empowers creators and audiences to produce original narratives that transcend traditional categories and platforms. Watch New Form series on a variety of global outlets, including Facebook Watch, YouTube Red, TBS, CW, and TruTV.

It is telling to see how some of this work is created and circulated using production models designed for cinema, television, and digital media rather than those developed for the print world. This may be one of the most profound differences between second- and third-generation electronic literature: while second-generation e-literature aligns itself with the literary tradition formed by the print world (and publishes zines, anthologies, blogs, and web pages) and the art world (gallery exhibitions and installations), third-generation e-literature identifies itself with electronic and digital media in terms of its formats and publication models, producing video and interactive works that could be published as video games and other kinds of digital content. This extends to notions of the author and artist as creative geniuses who labor in isolation or tight collaborations to create works that are then produced and shaped by craft professionals (editors, layout designers, illustrators, typographers, printers, binders, and others) to reach publication. And while the web has returned the means of production to individual authors and encouraged a DIY (do-it-yourself) self-publication aesthetic, academia has elevated it to a constitutive part of e-lit poetics this by connecting these practices with famous authors and craftsmen like William Blake and William Morris. Perhaps the time has come to explore, encourage, and recognize other models that may be better suited to the contemporary media economy.

To sum up the differences between the generations, I am including a slide from my ELO 2018 presentation that visually juxtaposes the second and third generations, point by point (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 Slide from ELO 2018 presentation “Third Generation Electronic Literature.”

It is important to note that both generations can coexist harmoniously. The second generation seeks originality and formal innovation while third generation is exploring existing forms, established platforms, and interfaces. In second-generation works readers must learn how to operate them—to the extent that many works feature instructions and many books about electronic literature, feature explanations on how to read works of e-lit (such as Funkhouser’s *New Directions in Digital Poetry*). In third-generation works, readers are already familiar with the interface and genres and the works don’t usually seek to challenge that established training because it reduces readership. This is why works from the second generation are published in websites and that readers must go visit with their computer frequently needing plugins to access the work, while third-generation works seek to reach audiences where they already are with computationally simpler works. Perhaps the most significant difference is in the line between digital modernism and postmodernism and their affinity to (highbrow) literary culture and (lowbrow) popular culture.

This chapter may give the impression that one generation of e-literature is somehow better than the other. To correct this, I propose a series of fallacies that unpack technical and aesthetic biases that emerge from the historical development of the field and recent developments in digital culture, pointing out how they affect our notions of quality.

The Pioneer Fallacy is that to be the first to do something doesn’t mean it’s a quality work. Pioneering works are of historical interest, but that doesn’t mean they’re successful. On the contrary, they’re frequently interesting failures.

The Generational Fallacy reminds us that just because it's the most recent generation does not mean its work is better. In most cases these works lack the aesthetic and technical sophistication that second-generation works have developed over years of work with scholars and curators.

The Technical Fallacy states that technical complexity does not equal quality. Too often we find ourselves talking about the works on a technical level which is interesting, but that is often a distraction from whether a work is successful or not on its own merits.

The Viral Fallacy means that just because something is super popular doesn't mean it's good. "Lazy Cat" is fun, but I don't know if it will stand the test of time.

The Hipster Fallacy states that made-from-scratch does not equal quality. Whether you're using a highly polished product or you're hand-coding an interactivity or generative engine shouldn't be a factor in assessing the quality of a work.

The User Fallacy is the flip side of the hipster fallacy. We can't say that someone is just a user and what they're doing in Snapchat or some other platform cannot have merit from an e-literary perspective.

There are other biases and fallacies we could consider, but the idea is to try to keep an open mind when considering the many ways people arrive at creating and experiencing electronic literature.

To conclude, I propose four phases of electronic literature adoption, both at an individual level and a societal level: approach, discovery, experimentation, and adoption.

Approach is when people start to do things with other media that are better suited for digital media. For example, when Borges writes "The Garden of Forking Paths," Cortazar writing *Rayuela*, and Choose Your Own Adventure books become popular you know that the world is ready for hypertext.

Discovery is the moment of realization that digital media have great potential for writing. Many scholars and artists in the ELO community have an e-lit origin story (like superheroes) when we came to a moment of realization: "This is what this digital media can do." "This is its potential." This is the space of pioneering and proof of concept works, both at a personal and social level. Belén Gache's "Word Toys," for example, is a virtual cover organizing a series of short e-lit pieces developed in Flash that explore concepts and interfaces.

Exploration is when the field develops and matures. Authors go beyond their discovery phase and develop their corpus of works, maturing and refining their poetics. Scholars study and teach works, theorize the field,

curate exhibitions, prepare journals, 'zines, collections, archives, and other resources. The ELO community and other scholarly and artistic communities around the world are an indication that that particular country or region has reached the Exploration phase.

Adoption is when electronic literature goes mainstream and is recognized at a societal level, beyond academia. Electronic literature, its digitality and materiality start to fade, and becomes naturalized. People create electronic literature without realizing that that is what they are doing. This is partly what is happening with the third generation of electronic literature. It is starting to be adopted by digitally native populations.

This is where we can see a generational age difference in terms of the authorship of third-generation works of e-lit. Many ELO members, such as myself, grew up at a time where we could see the digital materiality sharply. Most third-generation e-lit writers are a younger generation who have naturalized what was experimental to us, and even though the work they create may be naïve and disconnected from the artistic and literary traditions of the past, they were more directly formed by digital culture. They also have massive numbers on their side and it is a matter of time before quality work emerges from the vibrant and massive e-literary production happening in apps and circulating in social media networks.

I predict that a third-generation work is going to break through to mainstream attention with something really exciting and awaken the world to electronic literature. And I hope that we scholars and artists formed in the first and second generations are able to recognize it as electronic literature. We need to build bridges between e-lit generations so they can learn from us as we learn from them. Nothing less than the future of the field is at stake.

Note: This is an adaptation of my talk titled "Third Generation Electronic Literature" offered in the panel Towards E-Lit's #1 Hit during the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) Conference in Montreal on August 14, 2018. Special thanks to my students Ashley Páramo and Aleyska Estevez for their help converting a raw YouTube transcript into intelligible text and with the list of references, respectively.

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