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4

Community, Institution, Database: Tracing the Development of an International Field through ELO, ELMCIP, and CELL

Davin Heckman

Publishing digital anthologies and databases, testing out new models of distribution, exhibition, and preservation, and building interdisciplinary collaboration not only between traditional academic disciplines but also between distinct international communities, one might think of electronic literature as the research and development wing of the digital humanities. This chapter will situate these three projects within an emergent institutionalization of network-based creative community in electronic

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Scott Rettberg for his collaboration on the draft of the proposal for this chapter and for his regular feedback throughout the writing process. More important than this is Rettberg's powerful role in all three institutions referenced in this piece, the ELO, ELMCIP, and CELL. Over the last several years, I have been fortunate to work very closely with all three projects, and have had a chance to see their operations from the inside and out. Without Rettberg's visionary leadership, collaborative spirit, and generous nature, the history of the field might have followed a very different path. I am convinced that the energy and creativity of this community would surely have coalesced into something significant, it's hard to imagine the field without these institutions.

literature. Specifically, this chapter will focus on the cluster of activity that circulates around three specific institutions that have sought to document the field as it has developed: the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO)—a literary nonprofit organization that has become central to the evolution of a community of creative and critical practice in the field; Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP)—a three-year European research project which explored the domain of network-based creative community even as it produced research infrastructure including an Electronic Literature Knowledge Base to enable better mapping of the field; and, finally, the Consortium for Electronic Literature (CELL)—an international project created to bring shared search capabilities and common cataloging standards to electronic literature databases.

Electronic literature can be said to be a field federated through two models which may seem incoherent in terms of their relation to institutionalization. On the one hand, the practices of individual artists and authors can, to date, be understood as to being to large extent atomized and avant-garde. In comparison to the practices and institutions of contemporary print literature, ranging from commercial publishers, libraries, academic creative writing programs, and literature programs with long histories, it can be said that electronic literature authors have worked mostly in isolation, producing experimental literary works for which there has been virtually no commercial demand, few educational support structures, and even a lack of basic research infrastructure such as library cataloging standards.

Without the institutional legacy that supports the practices more commonly associated with the traditions of print literature, the field of electronic literature has attempted to leverage the concept of the “literary” from the print tradition to describe nonprint forms. See, for instance, the ELO’s definition:

Electronic literature, or e-lit, refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer. Within the broad category of electronic literature are several forms and threads of practice ...¹

Until recently, the organization listed specific forms, like hypertext fiction, kinetic poetry, interactive fiction, and others, as examples of the kinds of practice that might fit under the umbrella term with the understanding that the field will continue to evolve and new forms will emerge.

One might balk at the strategic circularity of “literary aspects” in this definition of “literature.” But, in fact, it is an honest definition. In many

¹“What is E-Lit?” Electronic Literature Organization, accessed on December 6, 2016, <http://eliterature.org/what-is-e-lit/>.

respects, the genres and forms that we envision when we discuss cultural practices like literature are the product of shared fictions. The forms themselves usually emerge as mutations of established practices, exploiting the recognized formalities of practice to carry little (and not so little) bursts of novelty into the lives of those that behold them. For instance, the pragmatics of the spoken word can be nudged ever so slightly into musicality through rhythm, rhyme, and consonance, to create linguistic constructions that sound slightly more pleasurable than more instrumental utterances. Static concepts can become lively through the use of metaphors. Words themselves are held in constant tension between what we understand them to be and what they can become. The literary can be understood the potential for emergence that exists wherever subjects seek to relate through expanded systems of signification.

The history of literature is an elaboration on this theme that carries across millennia and spans cultures. On top of this undulating landscape of instrumental words and their monstrous offspring, we deploy terms like poem, novel, sonnet, romance, fable, etc. These containers give names to the qualities of various waveforms, which at their most accurate, gesture towards vague, familial resemblances that are shared by handfuls of works, but that never fully account for their magic. At their worst, they describe desiccated formulae of banal repetition. Consider the difference in “dystopian fiction” that exists between, say, *The Left Behind* series and, say, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. While both might be categorized as dystopian speculations, one might be seen as formula, the other literature.

When we sit down to talk about literature, there are some general expectations of what we might encounter. We can envision an anthology, a great writer, a class we once took, a cinematic professor pontificating emphatically about the word’s power over us. But in the end, we tend to use our general understanding of literature as a way of raising a set of expectations around writing. The works themselves, however, are not notable for their ability to conform to a generic stereotype. They get invited into the generalizing discourse of literature based, hopefully, on some exceptional claim they can make to this institutional definition. Which is to say, the categorical understandings themselves can frame our strategies of textual interpretation, but they cannot actually provide a definitive rubric for the apprehension of “the literary.”

Electronic literature is no different, except, perhaps that its “institutional definition” arrives to us in a historical moment that is specifically reflexive of institutional definitions. The formal medium of presentation, the computer, is relatively new. This formal medium itself is undergoing rapid transformation (desktop, GUI, networked, mobile, haptic, distributed, and so forth). The means by which this medium makes its content present is highly malleable and unstable. The scholarly milieu into which this definition

enters has an unsettled definition of literature.² The larger society as a whole is undergoing a massive shift in literacy, thanks first to the computer, the mobile, and whatever is next. As a result, electronic literature is and remains for the indefinite future, a shifting concept.

Nevertheless, given the availability of new technologies and the creative opportunities these enabled, writers have been drawn to the new media and the globally networked writing environment and have now managed to develop a corpus of work that can be read as a literature. If we can observe that these writers and the critics and theorists who have contextualized their works have not inherited a great deal of economic, social, or research infrastructure, we can also note that this very lack of community and resources has been generative. Lacking traditional publishers interested in distributing this work, elit writers have been driven to formulate new types of publishing entities. Lacking libraries and archives capable of cataloging, disseminating, and preserving these works, writers and scholars have reached out to libraries, archives, and database developers. Lacking meeting places within established academic organizations and traditional disciplinary frameworks, these actors have found opportunities to resituate their activities within new, emergent communities. So if the communities of creative and critical practice in the field of electronic literature were born in a networked digital environment largely free of the dispositif of print literary culture, over the past two decades, a remarkable amount of activity has taken place to develop infrastructure particular to the practices of electronic literature.

The past several decades of radical media change, and the interrogation and contextualization of these changes through an emerging digital arts practice, have outpaced the methodical practices of documentation, preservation, and criticism, resulting in an uneven record of this transformative period. In a 2011 keynote address at ISEA (the International Symposium for Electronic

²Certainly, Vannevar Bush's 1945 text, "As We May Think" in *The Atlantic*, anticipates an entirely new system of textual organization, symbolic communication, and daily life that the computer would unleash. Theodor Holm Nelson's "Complex Information Processing: A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate" from the 1965 ACM conference introduces the term "Hypertext," fleshing out the implications of the digital computer for human textual expression. Running alongside these shifting technologies of language is the avant-garde tradition that sought new techniques of poetic and narrative language, leading through Stéphane Mallarmé, Virginia Woolf, Raymond Queneau, Jorge Luis Borges, Augusto de Campos, and others. It's fair to say that the reorganization of media imagined by people like Bush and Nelson and the deconstruction of the literary imagined by the avant-garde are part of the cultural shift into "postmodernism." That critics/philosophers like Roland Barthes, Marshall McLuhan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and others could identify profound shifts in subjectivity and knowledge during this same period. The net effect is an overdetermined resistance to an objective definition of the "literary." Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think," *The Atlantic*, July 1945, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/>.

Art) entitled, “Media Art Explores Image Histories: New Tools For Our Field,” media historian, Oliver Grau, identified this field as fertile ground for scholarship:

Comparable with natural sciences, digital media and network research catapult the humanities within reach of new and essential research tools (Wikipedia might be a glimpse of what is possible) and what we need are collective documentation and preservation tools for media art. Or, even better, tools which can manage an entire history of visual media and human perception by means of thousands of sources.³

Beyond simply recording the changing tools (as platforms and devices vie for market dominance), Grau sees the potential for revolutionary change in knowledge practices, explaining, “Documentation changes from a one-way archiving of key data to a pro-active process of knowledge transfer.”⁴ It is critical, then, not only to have a community of practice and organizations that recognize this practice, but to develop archival strategies with which one can learn, criticize, and advance the field.

Before entering with a discussion of the human institutions that have played a powerful role in the advancement of the field, it is necessary to meditate on the “electronic” component of this community. In fact, it is hard to discuss the success of the community without addressing a key structural advantage: the disruptive nature of its chosen medium. The very medium which often estranges electronic literature from its consideration by literary institutions, has also been a key to its dynamism and success. Its members have, in many cases, created and controlled the texts that they have written. Likewise, this community has built networks of distribution, collaboration, and critique that can step outside the concentrated power of traditional institutions. A lone digital poet working against the advice graduate advisors in Bowling Green, Ohio, for instance, can immediately find works, readers, venues, and colleagues around the world. While many know the alienation of seeing their work disregarded or even insulted by colleagues in their immediate geographical proximity, this experience has nurtured feelings of affinity among those with shared enthusiasm for the field. The ability to publish and circulate one’s work digitally, particularly in the early days of the web when such connections had a serendipitous quality to them, is part of the culture of the community. While it would be naïve to say that electronic literature is “free,” it is important to note that its production costs, systems of distribution, and economics are different

³Oliver Grau, “Media Art Explores Image Histories: New Tools for Our Field” ISEA2011, Istanbul, Turkey, 2011, accessed December 6, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/35194212>.

⁴Ibid.

from the tradition that precedes it. This dynamic has allowed an insurgent community of authors, readers, and scholars to circumvent the inertia that complements the formal conservatism of institutions that focus on print media. This alterity of practice often finds itself matched in the avant-garde form and content of the works themselves.

A watershed moment in the history of the field, then, might very well be the decision to form an institution around such an unfixed practice. Of course, we cannot discount the specific crystallizations of resources around specific forms (for instance, the flurry of innovation around Eastgate Systems, Inc., the first publishing house for literary hypertext in 1987 or the formation of Lecture Art Innovation Recherche Ecriture in 1988). But electronic literary practice has advanced through the relationship between communities, institutions, and databases. The development of the field remains an ongoing project, but the path through ELO, ELMCIP, and CELL offers a unique view on how experimental work in the humanities can mature into an international field.

Electronic Literature Organization (ELO)

The Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) was founded in 1999 by Scott Rettberg, Robert Coover, and Jeff Ballowe to serve as a nonprofit advocate for the study, preservation, and promotion of this emerging practice. That same year, the ELO developed a wiki-based Electronic Literature Directory (ELD) to provide records of works in the field. A decade after the release of the first incarnation of the Directory, the ELD was rebuilt and a peer-review process was implemented.⁵ The Electronic Literature Directory Working Group has been a significant partner in ongoing discussions with similar database projects, and has taken on a leading role, under Joseph Tabbi, in the eventual formation of the Consortium (CELL).

In addition to the Directory, the ELO is responsible for the *Electronic Literature Collection*, an edited anthology of “born-digital” texts. The first volume of the *ELC* was published in 2006, a second in 2011, with a third under production. Each volume of the *ELC* can be found on the Organization’s website.⁶ The scope of the *ELC* is ambitious, each containing a broad selection of edited work by a rotating cast of artists and scholars active in the field, creating a competitive venue for publication that

⁵A key contribution to the development of ELD 2.0 was a Start-Up Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, both a validation of the ongoing strength of the e-lit community and a contribution to its growth.

⁶*Electronic Literature Collection*, Vols. 1–3, accessed December 5, 2016, <http://collection.eliterature.org>.

nevertheless manages to provide a sample of exemplary work in an ever-expanding landscape of creative activity.

The ELO has published a number of key texts of use to artists and scholars. These include *State of the Arts: The Proceedings of the 2002 Electronic Literature Organization Symposium* (2003, edited by Rettberg); Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort's "Acid-Free Bits: Recommendations for Long-Lasting Electronic Literature" (2004); Alan Liu, David Durand, Nick Montfort, Merrilee Proffitt, Liam R. E. Quin, Jean-Hugues Réty, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin's "Born-Again Bits: A Framework for Migrating Electronic Literature" (2005); N. Katherine Hayles' "Electronic Literature: What is it?" (2007); Joseph Tabbi's "Toward a Sematic Literary Web" (2007); and Hayles's *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008).⁷

Since the ELO's founding, the Organization has held a multitude of conferences.⁸ These conferences include scholarly papers, roundtable discussions on current issues in the field, artists' talks, gallery exhibitions, performances, and workshops. In 2012, the Organization adopted a schedule that includes annual conferences, with strong commitment to the international identity of the field. In between the conferences, the organization sponsors exhibitions, readings, and panel discussions at related events.

A key aspect of the ELO's ambitious portfolio of accomplishments is the strength of the overall field it represents. Articles developed from

⁷N. Katherine Hayles, "Electronic Literature: What is it?" Electronic Literature Organization, last modified 2007, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://eliterature.org/pad/elp.html>; N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Alan Liu, David Durand, Nick Montfort, Merrilee Proffitt, Liam R. E. Quin, Jean-Hugues Réty, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, "Born-Again Bits: A Framework for Migrating Electronic Literature," Electronic Literature Organization, 2005, accessed December 5, 2016, <http://eliterature.org/pad/bab.html>; Scott Rettberg, editor, *The State of the Arts: The Proceedings of the 2002 Electronic Literature Organization Symposium*, Electronic Literature Organization, 2003, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://eliterature.org/state/>; Joseph Tabbi, "Toward a Sematic Literary Web," Electronic Literature Organization, 2007, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://eliterature.org/pad/slw.html>; Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, "Acid-Free Bits: Recommendations for Long-Lasting Electronic Literature," Electronic Literature Organization, 2004, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://eliterature.org/pad/afb.html>.

⁸Sites include University of Porto, Portugal (2017); University of Victoria, Canada (2016); University of Bergen, Norway (2015); University of Milwaukee, USA (2014); Paris, France (2013); West Virginia University, USA (2012); Brown University, USA (2010); Washington State University Vancouver, USA (2008); University of Maryland, USA (2007); University of California Santa Barbara, USA (2003); and University of California Los Angeles, USA (2002). "History," Electronic Literature Organization, accessed December 5, 2016, <http://eliterature.org/elo-history/>.

conference presentations have seen publication in venues like *Electronic Book Review*, *Hyperrhiz*, *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, *Formules*, *Dichtung Digital*, and as standalone publications.⁹ Authors who have shared creative work within the ELO network have often enjoyed broad success in other venues as well.¹⁰ Furthermore, the portfolio of tools offered by the ELO (white papers, collections, conference proceedings, etc.) are often used as reference points by many of these same individuals. This is not to say that the ELO is the determining factor of success in these cases, but to say that the Organization has consistently been a meeting place/transmission point for many of the most talented and creative participants in this emerging field. This fact speaks to the intensifying effects that occur where communities of practitioners, institutions, and archives converge to create sustainable cultural practices. And, when few other institutional support structures exist to cultivate this activity, such meeting points are critical for sharing, critiquing, and improving practice.

Electronic Literature as a Model of Community in Practice

Initiated in 2010 with funding from the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) JRP for Creativity and Innovation, Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP) is a multinational

⁹Notable critical publications from the past two years include Sandy Baldwin, *The Internet Unconscious* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015); Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Rustad, *Analyzing Digital Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Dave Ciccoricco, *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014); Chris Funkhouser, *New Directions in Digital Poetry* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jessica Pressman, Mark Marino, and Jeremy Douglas, *Reading Project* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015); Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson, and Benjamin Robertson, *Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

¹⁰Some prominent examples include notable authors' archives at the Harry Ransom Center (Michael Joyce), Duke University (Stephanie Strickland), and Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (Deena Larsen). Other prominent examples include print and digital publications of writers like J. R. Carpenter, Nick Montfort, Andy Campbell, Kate Pullinger, Mez Breeze, Scott Rettberg, Mark Amerika, Shelley Jackson, Jason Nelson, Steve Tomasula, and many others.

research project with seven institutional partners in six European nations.¹¹ The goal of the project was to “investigate how creative communities of practitioners form within a transnational and transcultural context in a globalized and distributed communication environment.”¹² Over a three-year period, ELMCIP explored the relationship between community and creative practice in Electronic Literature, producing 179 directly affiliated project publications, six seminars, a conference, an exhibition, an anthology of creative works, two books, and the world’s largest research database in the field of electronic literature: the ELMCIP Knowledge Base.¹³ Beyond these clearly identifiable outcomes, this period of intense activity amplified the ongoing efforts of the ELO, providing the stimulus for new scholarship, publications, creative works, and relationships.

An especially useful contribution to understanding the history of the field is the ELMCIP project’s formal relationship with the journal *Dichtung Digital*. *Dichtung Digital* 41 and 42, both published in 2012, provide specific accounts of genres and communities of electronic literary writing that often are not entirely integrated with institutional actors identified in this chapter. For instance, Philippe Bootz’s “From OULIPO to Transitoire Observable: The Evolution of French Digital Poetry” established a lineage for digital poetry in France that begins with OULIPO in the 1960s and runs through ALAMO in the 1980s.¹⁴ Serge Bouchardon’s “Digital Literature in France,” while acknowledging many of the same antecedents as Bootz, focuses primarily on the community of writers organized around the *e-critures* mailing list and website.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Laura Borràs Castanyer’s “Growing Up Digital” focuses on the emergence of electronic literary practices in Spain, which draws a lineage through centuries of constrained, experimental

¹¹These partners include the University of Bergen (Norway; Project Leader: Scott Rettberg; and Co-investigator: Jill Walker Rettberg), the Edinburgh College of Art (Scotland; Principal investigator: Simon Biggs; Co-investigator: Penny Travlou), Blekinge Institute of Technology (Sweden; Principal investigator: Maria Engberg; Co-investigator: Talan Memmott), the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands; Principal investigator: Yra Van Dijk), the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia; Principal investigator: Janez Strehovec), the University of Jyväskylä (Finland; Principal investigator: Raine Koskimaa), University College Falmouth at Dartington (England; Principal investigator: Jerome Fletcher), New Media Scotland (Scotland; Mark Daniels). “Partners,” *ELMCIP*, accessed December 6, 2016, <http://elmcp.net/page/partners>.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³For a more detailed account, see ELMCIP, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://elmcp.net>.

¹⁴Philippe Bootz, “From OULIPO to Transitoire Observable: The Evolution of French Digital Poetry,” *Dichtung Digital* 41 (2012), accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2012/41/bootz.htm>.

¹⁵Serge Bouchardon, “Digital Literature in France,” *Dichtung Digital* 41 (2012), accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2012/41/bouchardon.htm>.

writing in the Spanish print tradition.¹⁶ Hans Kristian Rustad's contribution maps the development of the field in the Scandinavian countries.¹⁷ Scott Rettberg's "Developing an Identity for the Field of Electronic Literature" provides a genealogy of the field as it emerged in the context of the ELO, which was initially rooted in a network of North American authors and creators.¹⁸

In addition to the geographical and national accounts of electronic literature communities, a number of essays address digital writing communities formed around specific forms, practices, and relationships. Loss Pequeño Glazier provides an account of the field that is strongly focused on the poetic tradition and that leads through the international community of writers affiliated with the Electronic Poetry Center and the international E-Poetry festivals that this network of writers participate in.¹⁹ Nick Montfort and Emily Short focus on the thriving community of writers writing under the umbrella of Interactive Fiction (or IF).²⁰ And finally, Jill Walker Rettberg takes a "distant" view of electronic literature, sketching out the contours of the field as perceived through the lens of digital analytics.²¹ While the dual issues of *Dichtung Digital* amount to more than mere documents of community practice, when seen from the perspective of this chapter as creative communities, this output of the ELMCIP project represents an interweaving of multiple sub-communities of practice and help us illustrate the emergence of electronic literature as a global phenomenon.

Though it would be difficult to assess the relative value of any one piece of the ELMCIP project, the Knowledge Base initiative is certainly the most visible legacy of this experiment. It serves as an entryway to the project, yet the genius of this open-source tool is the way that it serves to map

¹⁶Laura Borràs Castanyer, "Growing up Digital: The Emergence of E-Lit Communities in Spain. The Case of Catalonia 'And the Rest is Literature,'" *Dichtung Digital* 42 (2012), accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.dichtung-digital.de/en/journal/archiv/?postID=620>.

¹⁷Hans Kristian Rustad, "A Short History of Electronic Literature and Communities in the Nordic Countries," *Dichtung Digital* 41 (2012), accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2012/41/rustad.htm>.

¹⁸Scott Rettberg, "Developing an Identity for the Field of Electronic Literature: Reflections on the Electronic Literature Organization Archives," *Dichtung Digital* 41 (2012), accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2012/41/rettberg.htm>.

¹⁹Loss Pequeño Glazier, "Communities/Commons: A Snap Line of Digital Practice," *Dichtung Digital* 42 (2012), accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.dichtung-digital.de/en/journal/archiv/?postID=540>.

²⁰Nick Montfort and Emily Short, "Interactive Fiction Communities: From Preservation through Promotion and Beyond," *Dichtung Digital* 41 (2012), accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2012/41/montfort-short.htm>.

²¹Jill Walker Rettberg, "Electronic Literature Seen from a Distance: The Beginnings of a Field," *Dichtung Digital* 41 (2012), accessed December 6, 2012, <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2012/41/walker-rettberg.htm>.

out the network of relations within the creative, critical, and institutional dimensions of the field. All works documented in the Knowledge Base can be linked to the works that they reference, the works that reference them, creators, publishers, venues, events, syllabi, etc. The result is a very rich framework that invites user participation to flesh out the field by connecting discrete artifacts and moments of production with the relevant relations to the rest of the field. In a relatively short period of time (and with significant stewardship provided by Scott Rettberg, Eric Dean Rasmussen, Elisabeth Nesheim, and Stein Magne Bjørklund), the Knowledge Base became the richest survey of the field (and continues to grow to this day).

In addition to the information stored in the Knowledge Base, ELMCIP's leadership in this area (open access, collaborative, and open source) has provided a useful template for others to adopt and develop. This backbone of cooperation, in conjunction with the ELO's similar efforts, have provided the proper context for the formation of the third institution discussed in this chapter: the Consortium on Electronic Literature.

Consortium on Electronic Literature (CELL)

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a number of other institutions with database projects emerged to join ELMCIP and the ELO to cover aspects of the growing field of electronic literature. Along with the editorial leadership of *Electronic Book Review*, which has been an advocate for experimental publishing and scholarship since its inception in 1994, a critical mass quickly cohered around the practice of electronic literature.

In 1999, Hermeneia: The Literary Studies and Digital Technologies Research Group was initiated in Spain. Since 2003, ADEL (originally LIKUMED), a project from the University of Siegen, has been documenting works of electronic literature in German. Beginning in 2005, the Canadian NT2 has been building a database to study hypermedia art and writing. The Brown Digital Repository, which began in 2008, catalogues and documents works of digital writing from Brown University.²² In 2006, Po-ex.net (Digital Archive of Portuguese Experimental Literature) was founded to document Portuguese experimental and electronic literature from the 1960s

²²The Language Arts program at Brown has been a leader in the exploration of electronic literary forms, often in collaboration across disciplines and institutions. Notable alumni include Mark Amerika, Shelley Jackson, Alan Sonndheim, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Talan Memmott, Brian Kim Stefans, Daniel Howe, William Gillespie, Aya Karpinska, Justin Katko, Judd Morrissey, Ian Hatcher, Claire Donato, Samantha Gorman, and others. See: "Digital Language Arts," Brown Digital Repository, accessed December 7, 2016, https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/collections/id_462/.

to the 1980s. In 2010, I ♥ E-Poetry, initially the product of an individual scholar, Leonardo Flores, began with daily reviews of works of electronic literature. An Australian Database, ADELTA (originally Creative Nation), and a Spanish database, Ciberia, are currently in development.²³

The NT2 lab in Montreal is responsible for the technical development of the search tool, which will ultimately require all partners to adopt common metadata standards and shared taxonomy, and will allow scholars to conduct refined searches across all partner databases and, eventually, to deploy new analytic tools over thousands of records.²⁴

Driven by an array of complementary tendencies that circulate in the discourse around the field, the concept of a consortium of database projects was perhaps as overdetermined as the field's resistance to a simple definition of electronic literature. For instance, Joseph Tabbi envisioned *Electronic Book Review* in light of digital space: "This is the late age of print we're in, when all the books worth saving are being scanned into digital archives, and the very conception of the book as a fixed object is giving way to the hyperreality of letters floating on a screen."²⁵ This mood of excitement about the creative and critical potential of digital spaces remains as a key motivation for these institutions to share their knowledge of the field and extend the reach of their constituencies. At the same time, Rettberg's commitment to sharing data as a basic principle for computing and a strategy for longevity (evident in his contributions to both ELMCIP's Knowledge Base and the ELO's wiki-based iteration of the ELD) was an equally compelling impetus for collaboration. A third theme, expressed by Heckman in "The Disturbed Dialectic of Literary Criticism in an Age of Innovation," is the idea that collecting our efforts might offset the disruptive effects of speed on our

²³A number of meetings have been critical to the evolution of CELL. Meeting sites include the LitNet project in Siegen (Winter 2008), the Maryland Institute of Technology in the Humanities (Summer 2008), Washington State–University Vancouver (Summer 2009), the University of Colorado, Boulder (Winter 2009), Brown University (Summer 2010), the University of Western Sydney (Winter 2010), the University of Bergen (Summer 2011), West Virginia University (Summer 2012), Paris 8 (Summer 2013), and the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (Summer 2014), University of Bergen (Summer 2015).

²⁴The CELL project is supported financially through an array of sources: NEH Digital Humanities Start-up grant; Programme Québec–États-Unis by the Ministère des Relations internationales, de la Francophonie et du Commerce extérieur du Québec; Center for Literary Computing at West Virginia University, including a 2014 PSCoR Grant; the Electronic Literature Organization; the University of Bergen; and the University of Siegen. All members of the Consortium contribute to the overall success of the project. For more information on projects affiliated with the Consortium on Electronic Literature, see: "Members," *CELL: Consortium on Electronic Literature*, accessed December 5, 2016, <http://cellproject.net/members>.

²⁵Joseph Tabbi, "ebr version 1.0: Winter 1995/96," *Electronic Book Review* (December 1995), accessed December 6, 2012, <http://electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/manifesto>.

processes of care and attention to cultural practices.²⁶ By identifying these particular forces driving the formation of the consortium, I do not mean to suggest that individuals played solitary roles that were strictly necessary to the success of the endeavor. I think it is fair to say that all participants are driven by an excitement for the potential opened up by the digital computer. Similarly, all seem equally informed by the recognition that open-source code, shared data, and a spirit of generous collaboration are key ethics for scholars working in a digital age. And, finally, the recognition that a common search tool would serve a key role in protecting our objects of study for the kind of careful criticism and deep appreciation appropriate for significant works of art.

Conclusion

One can look across the documents of any of the institutions covered in this chapter—the ELO, ELMCIP, and CELL—one can look at any member of CELL—and see the common enthusiasm for electronic literature, like DNA, genetically expressed throughout. The coalescence of these common impulses to create, read, and critique have provided a healthy foundation for the formation of a community practice as evidenced by its capacity to adopt an “institutional” character, or a collective identity that itself can be shared among its members (and, more importantly, is considered worth sharing among its members).

Although such institutions are formed from unique conditions giving rise to their existence, the next logical question becomes whether or not singular institutions belong to a broader arc of existence. Here, these three institutions have all answered questions of their historicity and futurity. The reason for this is simple: without broadly held definitions and in the absence of legacy institutions, the field of electronic literature has asked itself whether it has a history worth preserving and whether it has a future worth anticipating. In both cases, the collective response has been yes. And the strategies by which the field has launched itself forward and established its historicity are clear: to expand their networks to include more partners, to plan for the future by establishing databases and archives, and to refine its practice through critical reflection on these networks and databases.

In less than a generation, we can see in the emergence of a robust field of practice, nurtured through a strong cultural model founded on respect for

²⁶Davin Heckman, “The Disturbed Dialectic of Literary Criticism in an Age of Innovation,” *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* (November 2014), accessed December 6, 2016, <http://www.leoalmanac.org/disturbed-dialectic/>.

individual (and often idiosyncratic) contributions of artists, the engagement of an enthusiastic (and responsibly critical) collective, and the development of technologies of institutional preservation.

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