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Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: An Introduction

Dene Grigar

The title of our collection, *Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms, and Practices*, may seem an obvious one to scholars and artists already involved in electronic literature and the digital humanities. For well over a decade, presentations, exhibitions, courses, workshops, and papers addressing born-digital literary art have been featured at conferences held by the Modern Language Association (MLA)¹ and the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations (ADHO),² at centers and institutes like Digital Humanities at Berkeley³ and the Digital Humanities Summer Institute at the University of Victoria,⁴ and in publications like *Digital*

¹Electronic Literature Organization is an Allied Organization of the Modern Language Association. One of the criteria to gain this status is a description of past special sessions held at the convention. ELO and its members had been giving papers at the convention for close to two decades, beginning with Judy Malloy's "Between Narrator and the Narrative," presented at MLA 1992 on December 29, 1992. See <http://www.judymalloy.net/richmond/bowl.html>.

²For example, Kathi Inman Berens' paper presented at Digital Humanities 2013, "Debugging 'The Personal Is Political': Uncle Roger's Grandmother," discussed Judy Malloy's seminal work of electronic literature, *Uncle Roger*. See <http://dh2013.unl.edu/abstracts/ab-286.html>.

³See "No Legacy II Literatura electrónica," curated by Alex Saum-Pascual and Élika Ortega, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, February 16–May 5, 2017, <https://libraries.cca.edu/exhibitions/no-legacy-literatura-electronica/>.

⁴ELO and its members have taught at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute since 2011. One course example is "Introduction to Electronic Literature in Digital Humanities," which I introduced in 2014 and continues to be taught at the Institute by Davin Heckman and Astrid Ensslin under the title "Digital Fictions, Electronic Literature, and Literary Gaming." See <https://dhsi.org/course-offerings/>.

Humanities Quarterly (DHQ)⁵ and *Literary Studies in the Digital Age* (LSDA),⁶ to name but a few points of overlap. Additionally, funding for projects related to the archiving and documentation of electronic literature have been provided by the Office of Digital Humanities (ODH) of the National Endowment for the Humanities.⁷ Moreover, from 2006 to 2011 the Electronic Literature Organization—the hub of activity for electronic literature art and scholarship—was hosted by the Maryland Institute of Technology in the Humanities at the University of Maryland at College Park, arguably one of the top digital humanities centers in the world. Likewise, the university holds the collections of papers and art by two very prominent electronic literature artists, Deena Larsen⁸ and Bill Bly.⁹ The exhibition “No Legacy || Literatura electrónica,” curated by Alex Saum-Pascual and Élika Ortega and held at the Bancroft Library of UC Berkeley in spring 2016, showcased electronic literature, framing it as computational and “digital technologies in literary production in the networked world and its material connections with 20th-century technologized approaches to literature like futurism, concretism, creationism, stridentism, magical realism, and others” (“Introduction”).

While these examples suggest a synergy exists between two complimentary fields of study both birthed in the mid-twentieth century during the rise of digital technologies, our book takes the argument further by demonstrating that electronic literature—namely, experimental computer-writing that possesses “important literary aspects” (Hayles, “E-Lit: What is it?”) and is

⁵See, for example, Mark Marino’s “Review: The Electronic Literature Collection Volume I: A New Media Primer” (2008: 2.1), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/2/1/000017/000017.html>; Scott Rettberg’s “Communitizing Electronic Literature” (2009: 3.2), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/2/000046/000046.html>; and my essay, “Curating Electronic Literature as Critical and Scholarly Practice” (2014: 8.4), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/8/4/000194/000194.html>.

⁶See Davin Heckman and James O’Sullivan’s essay, “Electronic Literature: Contexts and Poetics” (2018), <https://dlsanthology.mla.hcommons.org/electronic-literature-contexts-and-poetics/>.

⁷See Joseph Tabbi’s 2009 award from the Office of Digital Humanities at the National Endowment for the Humanities, a project entitled “Electronic Literature Directory: Collaborative Knowledge Management for the Literary Humanities” (HD-50778-09), <https://securegrants.neh.gov/PublicQuery/main.aspx?f=1&gn=HD-50778-09>; and Stuart Moulthrop and my grant, “Pathfinders: Documenting the Experience of Early Digital Literature” (HD 51768), <https://www.neh.gov/divisions/odh/grant-news/announcing-23-digital-humanities-start-grant-awards-march-2013>.

⁸See “The Deena Larsen Collection,” <https://mith.umd.edu/research/deena-larsen-collection/>.

⁹See “The Bill Bly Collection of Electronic Literature,” <https://mith.umd.edu/research/bill-bly-collection/>.

“native to the digital environment” (Rettberg 2019: 5)—is *central* to the humanities, particularly one focusing on questions relating to digital culture and “the symbolic representation of language, the graphical expression of concepts, and questions of style and identity” (Burdick et al 2012.: 12). In fact, we argue that electronic literature is the logical object of study for digital humanities scholars who have, by the second decade of the twenty-first century, cut their teeth on video games, interactive media, mobile technology, and social media networks; are shaped by politics of identity and culture; and able to recognize the value of storytelling and poetics in any medium. As Scott Rettberg reminds us in “Electronic Literature as Digital Humanities,” one of the inspirations for this book: “[C]reative production ... is a digital humanities practice: not an application of digital tools to a traditional form of humanities research, but rather experiments in the creation of new forms native to the digital environment” (2015: 127). In sum, electronic literature *is* digital humanities because of our shared philosophy that a computer is not a tool or prosthesis that helps us to accomplish our work; rather, it is the medium in which we work.

This line of reasoning is articulated in the volume’s opening section, “Contexts”—that is, Giovanna Di Rosario, Kerri Grimaldi, and Nohelia Meza’s chapter “The Origins of Electronic Literature.” The authors place electronic literature squarely in the digital humanities, calling it “a new form of literature” that emerged in the 1950s with the introduction of the computer. Other chapters in this first section—Carolyn Guertin’s “Cyberfeminist Literary Space: Performing the Electronic Manifesto;” Astrid Ensslin et al.’s “Bodies in E-Lit” and Élika Ortega and Alexandra Saum-Pascual’s “Toys and Toons: From Hispanic Literary Traditions to a Global E-Lit Landscape”—all gesture toward the interest in identity and culture so common in both digital humanities and humanities scholarship, while Davin Heckman’s “Community, Institution, Database: Tracing the Development of an International Field through ELO, ELMCIP, and CELL” and Loss Pequeño Glazier’s “The E-Poetry Festivals: Celebration, Arts, Imaginations of Community” both speak to computer-based literary activities and events that help to situate electronic literature in practices embraced by the digital humanities.

If there are any doubts as to the deep connection between electronic literature and the digital humanities, they are dispelled with the second section of our book, where chapters focus on those literary forms informed by computational practices. Jim Bizzocchi’s and John Barber’s chapters remind us that literary experiences are grounded in both visual and aural traditions, opening the way for an understanding of literature in any medium as art. They evoke the views of John Cayley, who in his book *Grammalepsy*, argues for the term “digital literary art” rather than electronic literature, adding the caveat that “[t]here is art, but no one need mention that it is ‘digital’ because art is simply part of a culture that is

also, inevitably, historically digital, and these circumstances have little to tell us concerning the significance or affect of art, as such” (2018: 7). While the technical practices explained in some of the chapters in this section—physical computing in Helen Burgess’s “The Voice of the Polyrhetor: Physical Computing and the (e-)Literature of Things,” databases as in Theresa Jean and Karen Tannenbaum’s “Consuming the Database: The Reading Glove as a Case Study of Combinatorial Narrative,” and Twitter bots discussed in Leonardo Flores’s “Artistic and Literary Bots”—may be unfamiliar to digital humanities scholars, all position their art practices within literary *forms* recognizable to digital humanities scholars, that is fiction, poetry, and the creative essay.

The third and fourth sections of our volume, “Practices,” and “Artist Interventions,” respectively, introduce topics common to discussions surrounding literary works in digital humanities, such as archiving, collaboration, publishing, language, pedagogy, and artistic practice, even as these topics point to the need to rethink traditional approaches. My own chapter, “Challenges to Archiving and Documenting Born-Digital Literature: What Scholars, Archivists, and Librarians Need to Know” is born out of experiences I had while conducting research about electronic literature at institutions whose archives are built on print-based practices. Rob Wittig and Mark Marino’s “Come Play Netprov! Recipes for an Evolving Practice” presents improvisational performances the authors have produced, reminding as they do that the practice “lies at the intersection of literature, theater and performance, mass media (film and television), games (in particular Alternate Reality Games, ARGs, in which players physically enact roles and compete in real life), avant-garde visual arts (in galleries and museums), and born-digital Internet, personal media and social media practices.” Despite antecedents with traditional art forms, the authors ask, “When is a netprov finished?” and “What becomes of the netprov once the initial play period is over?”

Indeed, differences exist between literature and electronic literature, just as they do with the humanities and digital humanities, but at the heart of all of them is the focus on human expression, the human need to tell their stories, to use their gift of language to make sense of the world around them, and to burrow into the depths of understanding to explain what it means to be human, particularly human at a time when digital technologies are proliferating and impacting that world. The literature of the electronic arts does not seek to hide its dependency on computers any more than a traditional novel shuns print. But it calls for and needs digital humanities scholars who are trained in digital practices to study it, just as digital humanities scholars need a literature that reflects the world and daily practices in which they now all operate.

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