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Commentary

What Holds Electronic Literature Together?

Mark C. Marino

There's a telling moment in the interview with Donna Leishman, in which she balks at her own classification as an artist of electronic literature. She wonders aloud whether that title applies to her work:

I'm interested in, I mean from your perspective, how easy I am as a kind of member of electronic literature. It's something that I never quite escape. I sometimes think I'm an interloper. I sometimes think I'm one of them by virtue of having a piece created at the turn of the millennium, a kind of old maid.

Now, for over a decade, Leishman has created works using Flash and HTML5 that have been exhibited widely and circulated in multiple volumes of the Electronic Literature Collection, a periodic anthology of select works of e-lit. Why would she not obviously fit into this category?

When Leishman makes this comment, the interviewer notes that this is the fifth interview in which an artist asked some version of the question, "Am I really an e-lit person?" While artists, no doubt, always wonder how they will be categorized, the question bugging these artists speaks of a larger issue of ontology that is specific to electronic literature. The person chipping figures out of marble does not wonder if they are a sculptor; nor does the person making images out of paint wonder if they are a painter. But, digital artists creating works out of code and software commonly wonder if they are creating electronic literature. The problem grows out of the category itself.

The term "electronic literature" has been in use for over twenty years now, and though it seems to be a mere title for the writing that follows paper on digital applications, it has yet to be universally adopted. Many follow the lead of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) (founded in 1999), adopting this title

for “digitally born literature,” or that which could not be created or experienced without a computational device in the process. Of course, this is an English phrase that is variously translated in other languages, for example, *la littérature numérique* in French. But staying with English, this working definition is not so straightforward, for scholars do not classify all digitally born literary works as e-lit. For example, though some experimental ebooks may be considered electronic literature, most works of literature that are produced in the standard ePub format are not generally held to be electronic literature. It seems as soon as the creating technology becomes normalized, the work is no longer e-lit.

Or as I once argued (Marino, 2008), as soon as the second work is created in the same form, it becomes less interesting as electronic literature. Further works in the same form seem also to diminish in critical reception among e-lit scholars, as though—as absurd as it sounds—they were becoming less digital with each instantiation. Electronic literature, as it turns out, requires innovation, a use of a new platform or a misuse of an old one, a creative construction of code or reimagining of algorithms. I can remember an ELO conference at West Virginia University in 2012, when someone was explaining to me that QR codes were already old hat and weren’t worth experimenting with anymore. More than falling out of fashion, they were becoming part of mainstream communication. Now it is not uncommon to see a QR code on a drink from a fast food restaurant or on an ad in a magazine. When this once-novel technology becomes so banal, its place in the world of electronic literature tends to diminish.

The picture I am attempting to paint is the moving target that is electronic literature, or the stream that begins, like the water in Coleridge’s Xanadu, in a fountain of creativity and frothy scholarly reception followed by a surge in production that gradually recedes until it flows to the ice caves of common media until some future moment rediscovers it and innovates once again, reimagining and reinvigorating the older digital technology.

So, perhaps electronic literature is digitally born literature that engages with its medium in an innovative way. But that may also be insufficient. For works of electronic literature also seem to have affinities of construction. Or, is electronic literature merely a network of affiliated artists and scholars? Is electronic literature a name given to works produced by those who have been in contact with the ELO? That would seem a very poor and cliquish classification. And yet, the organization fits centrally into the history of this genre.

ELO co-founder Scott Rettberg writes of a 1999 conference at Brown University, where he “encountered a small but robust community of authors who

had chosen the computer as a platform for their literary endeavors, a motley and innovative crew of literary experimentalists”(2009). Author Robert Coover, who organized the conference, had been building such a community since his *Unspeakable Acts*, *Unnatural Practices* conferences, which he organized in the early 1990s alongside George Landow, who was publishing on the emerging form of Hypertext. Out of that conference, a group decided to form the ELO, a nonprofit founded to “foster and promote the reading, writing, teaching, and understanding of literature as it develops and persists in a changing digital environment” (eliterature.org). The organization would grow over the ensuing decades, fostering scholarship and exploration in the creative arts, along with the term itself.

While it may be that those associated with this organization are more likely to use its name, a number of endeavors launched by this organization strive to open up the term by identifying works of electronic literature throughout the world. These projects include the Electronic Literature Directory and its parent database, the CELL Project; the Electronic Literature Collections; and exhibits in the annual conferences. By actively seeking works beyond those created by members, these projects seek to apply electronic literature as a general term. However, because artists are ultimately not the arbiters of how their works are received and categorized by scholars, it is not surprising that any given artist may still wonder whether or not scholars would classify them as authors of electronic literature.

Surely Leishman and Pullinger’s works meet this criterion. *Front* does not so much innovate as hold a critical mirror up to the social media practices of contemporary life. Pullinger’s *Inanimate Alice* has included HTML, Flash/ActionScript, HTML5, and soon Virtual Reality. *Inanimate Alice* seems to parallel Alice’s growth with its own technological development. Electronic literature seems to be driven by a tendency always to probe and extend the affordances of the technology it uses for its medium or production. As soon as a technology of communication becomes normalized in a work, becomes in a sense invisible, it seems to become less desirable to artists of electronic literature, who do not merely kick the tires of communication technology; they spray paint on its walls; they hack its interfaces and jam its conventional channels and signals.

But if electronic literature seemed to rely on its avant-garde, counter-cultural, or punk aesthetic, the works of these artists disrupt that rule. Notable about these artists is the sponsorship of their work. Leishman’s *Front* was sponsored by the Scottish government, and Pullinger’s *Letter to Unknown Soldier* is a large-scale

public art project funded by the British government to be displayed at Paddington Station. So if these works are by definition innovative and beyond the norm, they are not necessarily outside of the realm of established institutions. In fact, their innovative use of digital platforms and potential for collaboration make them desirable to these grant-funding bodies who are eager to be at the crest of the wave of innovation rather than merely to be dragged in its undertow. Such characterization might make these artworks seem to be merely byproducts of the overall cultural commercial push toward technological innovation. Instead these artists choose to trouble and complicate that simple progress narrative, and they reflect on digital media and our digitally mediated lives in collaboration with partner artists, compatriots with complementary skills and gifts.

Collaboration is central to these artists and their works. Pullinger notes a variety of collaborators, Chris Joseph, Andy Campbell, and Mez Breeze, and Leishman collaborates with Mark Daniel and DJ Nord. Although collaboration is not required for electronic literature, it is common due to the large number of components and realms of expertise involved, particularly in narrative-based works such as these that incorporate unique user interfaces, images, text, and music. The digital work of literature is the contemporary Gesamtkunstwerk, and these assemblages often require teams to get them functioning.

However, more than merely requiring the technical skills of varied artisans, these works also reflect deep and often sustained collaboration and communal artistic production. Consider the ongoing collaboration between Pullinger, Joseph, and Ian Harper even as they grow their artistic collective. Working together over time, they have been able to collectively dream Alice's story even as they engage in shared reflection on our changing globe mediated and mutated through computational technologies. Having worked on a series of interactive stories with my children and illustrator Brian Gallagher, I have learned the beauties, the richness of sustained collaboration, especially in a digital format that allows opportunities for reinvention and reconfiguration. These sustained interactions also allow artists to continue to explore new aspects of digital art, since their shared creative paths push them to find new directions. Think of it not so much as a form that fetishizes novelty over familiarity but instead a realm driven by artists curious about how digital media affords new opportunities for digital art. Consider for example *Inanimate Alice's* transformations from Web-based FLASH to VR work.

Perhaps at this point, I have moved away from the necessary conditions of electronic literature into one of its frequent features, and one that it shares with other art forms, such as theater: collaboration. Nonetheless, it is worth noting, that as in the case of theatrical works, electronic literature extends its potential, its possibility space, to borrow a term from N. Katherine Hayles, when artists work together. Moreover, early theorization of the world of digital literature, going back to George Landow's *Hypertext*, stressed the importance of including a final collaborator, the one who completes the production of the work, the reader/interactor/player.

The last feature of these works, representative of other electronic literature, is the social engagement, the reflection on complex social issues. Both Leishman and Pullinger's collaborations treat upon the complex worlds of individuals, specifically young women in these cases, in the contemporary world. When placed against a backdrop of the sea of sports-based and violent military video games, these works stand out in their efforts to talk back. Of course, the world of gaming continues to generate so-called serious games and other literary games, reinvigorated particularly in the field of Twine and other interactive fictions, the majority of commercial offerings that fuel the AAA game market continue to come from these realms. I will not argue for or against the merits of those games, but it is easy to identify the literary resonance of these artistic works that take up the traditional challenges of the human condition in digitally mediated environs.

But at the point at which we are considering social factors, we are not discussing necessary factors of electronic literature, but frequent characteristics of literature in general. That is not to say that electronic literature requires social engagement in narrative form, but rather that like all literature, engagement with deep humanistic themes is common. However, it is probably the simultaneous engagement with nonhuman or even posthuman aspects of being that bring works squarely into the realm of electronic literature.

Leishman's question of whether or not she fits into the category of electronic literature raises a definitive issue in this moment of artistic production. Exploring what counts as electronic literature, rather than leading toward the exclusion of works from some digital canon, helps to identify the affinities that pull works such as these together and draw readers and artists back into these realms.

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