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Abstract: The article focuses on two subjects: the process of editing the *Electronic Literature Collection*, Volume 1 (2006), and the idea of genre in electronic literature. The author was one of four editors of the first volume of the *Collection*, along with N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Montoft, and Stephanie Strickland. The *Collection*, which will be published on a regular basis, is intended to distribute contemporary electronic literature to a wider audience, and to provide a contextual and bibliographic apparatus to make electronic literature more accessible to audiences and educators. In the past decades, the forms of literary artifacts described as electronic literature have diversified to the extent that it is difficult to continue describe them using traditional terms of literary genre. The essay addresses some the problems involved in classifying digital artifacts by genre, and suggests some avenues of addressing these epistemological challenges. The essay calls for a contextual understanding of works of electronic literature, based both on their nature as procedural artifacts and on their position within a historical continuum of avant-garde practices.

Editorial Process and the Idea of Genre in Electronic Literature in the *Electronic Literature Collection*, Volume One

The *Electronic Literature Collection*, Volume One <http://collection.eliterature.org/1>, published in 2006 by the Electronic Literature Organization, is a collection of sixty works of electronic literature available for free both online at collection.eliterature.org and on CD-ROM. The *Collection*, edited by Katherine Hayles, Stephanie Strickland, and myself, constitutes a broad introduction to the field of electronic literature, and includes representative work of a variety of forms of digital writing including hypertext fiction, kinetic poetry, combinatory forms, interactive fiction, and narrative animations. As the title indicates, it is our hope that this first collection will only be the first in an ongoing series of anthologies of electronic literature. The second volume of the *Collection* will be published in late 2009, and will be edited by Talan Memmott, Brian Kim Stefans, Rita Raley, and Laura Borràs Castanyer.

The mission of the Electronic Literature Organization is to foster and promote the reading, writing, teaching, and understanding of literature as it develops and persists in a changing digital

environment. As an ELO project, the most important function of the *ELC* is to more widely disseminate electronic literature. At least for the first iteration of the project, we felt it was very important that the *Collection* be made available for free, both in the sense of free speech and in the sense of free beer, so we asked all of the contributing authors to make their work available under a Creative Commons license. The *Collection* itself and all of the works included within it are published under a Creative Commons attribution non-commercial license <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>, which means that educators can, for instance, install the collection on every computer in their school's computer lab without paying any licensing fees or asking permission. If a reader likes a particular work in the collection, she can feel free to email it or burn it to CD for a friend. Our main concern with this project is expanding the audience and cultural context of electronic writing. We felt that it was important, for the first time, to make freely available a large, edited collection of electronic literature—sixty works in the first volume—so that educators can send students to one place where stable copies of a variety of works will remain aggregated and archived, rather than having to hunt around and pull together a semester's worth of source texts from around the Web and from previously published CD-ROMs. Having this many works alongside each other makes it easier for students to spot and discuss themes, techniques, trends, and patterns.

Another important aspect of the *Collection* is to provide writers of electronic literature who create remarkable or exceptional works with a place of honor, a publication venue in which their work undergoes a process of editorial review and selection. Remarkably few other such venues exist. Although there are some online journals and a culture in which electronic literature is appreciated and shared at conferences, readings, and other venues, this is a creative culture that

exists outside of any sort of traditional market economy, or the types of publishing structures familiar in print culture. There is only one traditionally structured for-profit publisher of electronic literature in English, Eastgate Systems, and it no longer publishes new work with any frequency. So there is an important "credentialing" function to the *Electronic Literature Collection.*

The Editorial Process of the *ELC* 1

About 40% of the submissions for the first volume of the *ELC* were included in the finished volume. While the *ELC* should not be understood as a canon of electronic literature, the works included were carefully reviewed and recognized as worthy by the editors. I should explain a bit about our curatorial process, and why some works were included while others were excluded. Because the field is so widely varied and because every practitioner and critic working the field has his or her own aesthetic proclivities and preoccupations, we felt it important that the project be edited not by a single individual but by an editorial collective. Although N. Katherine Hayles, Nick Montfort, Stephanie Strickland and I had known and worked with each other on the ELO for years before we took on this project, we have quite diverse backgrounds and interests in electronic literature, so our angles of approach to the body of work and our areas of expertise were distinct from each other. While, for instance, Montfort has a long-standing interest in the text adventure form of Interactive Fiction, I came to the field via an interest in postmodernist approaches to hypertext fiction. Stephanie Strickland was a well-established print poet with an interest in connections between scientific ideas and poetics well before she ever published an electronic work, and her electronic work demonstrates an interest in how different interfaces can

enable the reader to access different registers of meaning. Hayles arrived at electronic literature via her theories of the posthuman and her interest in materiality in literature. Our contexts for understanding and describing the field of practice are not identical, and I think the content of the published *Collection* demonstrates that diversity of approach.

Our rule for including a work in the *Collection* was unanimous agreement among all four editors that it should be included. If, after discussion and debate of a work's merits and weaknesses, any one of the four of us thought that a work should not be included, it was rejected. The works were gathered both by an open call for works and by individual solicitations. Although a general consensus that the work was of literary quality was our first criterion, we were also striving for diversity in formal, generic, and technical approaches to electronic literature. After reading and interacting with all of the works individually, we got together in person and via conference call and debated the merits of each submission. As the diversity of our own editorial tastes and interests demonstrated to us, the field of writing practices grouped under the umbrella of electronic literature is a broad one, not easily or narrowly defined. On its website <http://eliterature.org/about/>, the ELO defines electronic literature in a general way as "works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer," but obviously the definition of "literary aspects" is somewhat ambiguous and open to subjective interpretation, while the range of ways that one can take advantage of the capabilities of computer and network context is very broad indeed. In the latter part of this article I'll describe how the process of selecting, reading, and reviewing the works included in the *ELC* 1 made me reassess the idea and function of genre in electronic literature.

The Archival Function of the Electronic Literature Collection

The *Electronic Literature Collection* also serves a very important archival function. Just as is the case with many other kinds of digital artifacts, there are many problems with the preservation of electronic literature that we are only now beginning to address. These problems range from platform shifts to hardware accessibility to the loss of the bits themselves. Some authors simply let URLs expire and lose track of the projects they have created. While a project like the *ELC* does not address all of the problems involved in archiving electronic literature, most archivists agree that the more copies of digital artifacts that are distributed the more widely, the more likely they will be to survive. At the very least, we know that there will be a couple thousand copies of all of the bits of all of the works on the *ELC* 1 widely distributed and archived. While having many copies of a digital artifact does not assure that it will remain readable as technologies and platforms change, it does mean that those future archivists will most likely be able to locate and access the files as they exist now. The interface of the *ELC* is also designed in a standards-compliant way, with valid XHTML in the manner recommended in the ELO's *Acid-Free Bits*, using no proprietary applications, so at least the structural and critical apparatus of the Collection is likely to remain durable.

Finally, publishing the collection in both CD-ROM and online form makes files available for a different kind of scholarly access—what Matthew Kirschenbaum describes as digital forensics—rather than simple Web viewing. The reader can more easily look at the directory structure, view the source files, and come to a better understanding of how tbese digital literary artifacts are made. While not all of the source files are included on the *ELC*—most of the Flash files are only executable—we are trying to encourage authors to make their process more

available to readers and scholars by releasing their source files, and will continue to do so in future iterations of the project.

The *Electronic Literature Collection* and Idea of Genre

During the past seven years, I have taught electronic literature in several different institutional contexts. There are many challenges involved in teaching this type of work to both literature students and students of other backgrounds. In addition to the boringly-familiar knee-jerk reaction that literature can only be presented in bound codex form and that to say otherwise is a form of heresy, there is a more understandably difficult hurdle involved in that most of the genre identifications familiar to students of print literature (fiction, poetry, drama) don't map particularly well onto most electronic literature.

The increasing obsolescence of the first version of the ELO's Electronic Literature Directory <http://directory.eliterature.org> is one example of the problem of trying to categorize electronic literature in generic terms. The first version of the Directory used generic criteria lifted from print traditions, describing works as long or short fiction or poetry, and described the technical aspects of the work. What it did not do particularly well was classify works on the basis of the terminology the creators of electronic literature themselves use to describe their works, or the evolving vocabulary of critics and theorists. The field has changed substantially since the directory was launched, and in the forthcoming second version of the Directory we are shifting to a somewhat less hierarchical, more emergent, folksonomical system of classification, using keywords or tags, as well.

We asked the authors of each work in the *ELC* to provide a short description of it. The editors then provided an additional, somewhat more objective editorial description for each work, and we assigned each work a set of appropriate keywords. We felt that this kind of curatorial work was important to frame the work, particularly for people new to the field and the possibilities of electronic writing.

With the *ELC*, we have begun to introduce a more flexible, less hierarchical system of tagging. So if is a work can clearly be described as poetry or fiction, it will be tagged as such, and technical descriptors such as the software platform: Flash, XHMTL, Inform, etc. will be tagged, but we also include more of the evolving critical vocabulary, for instance, by labeling a work as "codework" or "hacktivism" or "encyclopedic narrative." The use of multiple, varied, and specific descriptors is much more in line with the context of the current field than simply describing a particular web application as an electronic poem or a story. The tags are also non-hierarchal and the list of works can be sorted by any tag, as well as by author and title, so that people reading and studying and appreciating them in different contexts can access work from a number of different angles. The tags themselves are defined, in order to begin to assemble a more coherent shared critical vocabulary. The new version of the Electronic Literature Directory, to be released in 2009, incorporates this more flexible system of classification.

Genre nevertheless remains a useful concept in several senses. The most important is that cultures of practice form around genres. While some types of lyrical or epigrammatic print novels might share more characteristics with poetry than they do with many other novels, and while some narrative poems might be more like short stories than they are like most other poems, the way that they are received, contextualized, and studied is in a large part determined by the

writer's self-identification: “I am poet and this a poem. I am a novelist and this is a novel.” The way that we read a given work of literature is a significant sense determined by the other works of literature with which we group it. Birds of a feather tend to flock together. Writers regularly borrow from, steal from, reference, recycle, respond to, and parody the work of the other writers they perceive to be in their peer group. Genre identification both helps to shape the writer's idiom and the reader's sense that forms of literary expression exist within a historical continuum.

There is the question of what characteristics one should use to distinguish genres from each other in this context. The most common approach in electronic literature is probably to distinguish categories of work on the basis of purely technical/syntactic measures: What type of software or electronic document is a given work? This results in a kind of technological determinism. All of the hypertexts written in Eastgate System’s Storyspace software, for instance, share some common aspects in terms of interface that constrain those works in different ways than works produced as Web documents or Flash flies. The constraints of a given type of software or programming language then ultimately function as literary constraints. This is a different notion of genre than we're accustomed to from print culture, more like grouping literature distributed in manuscript form separately from literature printed in mass-market paperback than it is like grouping work as poetry or fiction.

Cultures of practice often form around electronic literature produced in a given type of software as well. Interactive Fiction (IF) is probably the best example of a self-sustaining platform-based culture of practice, an affinity group formed around a particular type of computer program. The five works of IF that are included in the *Collection* are radically different from one another in terms of their settings, characters, and themes. Emily Short’s *Galatea* is a retelling a

Greek myth, while her *Savoir-Faire* is a kind of 19th century magical realism set on a French estate. Jon Ingold's *All Roads* tells a story of an execution in Venice from multiple perspective, while Aaron A. Reed's Whom the *Telling Changed* is a retelling of the epic of Gilgamesh in which the interactor's goal is to persuade a crowd of people toward his or her viewpoint on matters of war and peace. Dan Shiovitz's *Bad Machine* is a story in which the user must learn and negotiate the corrupted language of a robot gone awry. While the subject matter of IF ranges from adventurous spelunking and super-hero adventures to these types of literary subject matters, the way that the reader negotiates the traversal of the text— by typing commands into a text parser, moving through a described story-world, and solving problems—is largely similar across the works. Interactive fiction has a dedicated user community with a fairly high and specialized level of expertise. The community has been successful at solving its own archiving and distribution challenges, in the absence of any commercial market. The downside is that working with IF can be very challenging for new users, who have to learn a set of conventions and commands that might initially seem hermetic.

In the specific context of teaching new media writing in a literature classroom, teachers also need to consider the dynamics of structuring a syllabus—of how a course can be structured into "units" that focus students' exploration of the subject. While one sensible way to structure a course is around particular themes that recur in many different types of work, another traditional and useful method is to structure a course around genres, that is, around works that share some formal and technical characteristics, or that emerge from a particular affinity group. The danger of such an approach to electronic literature is that too much time and effort can go into discussing the formal and technical aspects that bind a cluster of works together at the expense of

concentrated attention to the semantics of any given work. This is a particularly vexing challenge for teachers of electronic literature. Because the formal and technical aspects of electronic literature are so varied and often complex, we need to spend a great deal of class time discussing *how* a given work means before we can get to a discussion of *what* it might mean. Even when they don't practice as often as they should, most students know how to operate a codex book. The technology of the book is so familiar that it has become transparent. In studying electronic literature much time and effort is required simply to learn to traverse the text. This ergodic labor and the resulting discussions are worthwhile, but all this grappling with the technology can sometimes lead students to a rather mechanical approach to reading. I often have to remind students that while they first have to figure how to read a work of electronic literature, their analysis should go deeper than deciphering an unwritten user's manual. The text machine itself needs to be used, not simply observed and described as software. As with any other kind of literature, electronic literature must be read before it can be understood.

While in the late 1980s and early 1990s, most of the critical attention in literary studies on electronic literature was focused rather narrowly on hypertext, typically produced in the Storyspace platform. Now we see a staggering variety of approaches to electronic literature. If we think of electronic literature as "a movement," we need to consider that it is a different type of movement than any we've seen before, unbound by common forms or adherence to any singular manifesto, a kind of Noah's arc of literary forms filled with strange animals freely miscegenating and mutating at an extremely rapid rate.

During the decade that I've been involved with the ELO, there have been several "centering moments"—events or publications where we collected and presented, and to some degree

critically assessed, works of electronic literature. These centering moments have included the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards, the 2002 State of Arts conference, the 2006 *Collection*, and the 2008 Visionary Landscapes conference. In comparison to previous curatorial experiences, there almost as many submissions for the *ELC* as there were for the $10,000 2001 Electronic Literature Awards, and more of them "legitimate" in the sense that they were not simply e-books (PDFs of texts originally intended for print), but born-digital. In keeping with the general trends of the field, fewer of the submissions were hypertext—there were more forms of work represented, including generative work, interactive fiction, and kinetic poetry, and the work was produced in a number of different software platforms.

My own perception of literary genres in electronic media began to shift with the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards. While prior to that moment, most of my own expectations of electronic literature were driven by an interest in postmodernist aesthetics very closely related to the work of American writers from the 1970s onwards, with the finalists for the 2001 Electronic Literature Awards, I saw a number of writers challenging established notions of fiction. Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* was more a work of critical theory, of computational art, and a meditation on the nature of mediated identity and human/machine interaction than it was a narrative. Paul Chan's *Alternumerics* was a set of conceptually-named fonts, such as "The Future Must Be Sweet—after Charles Fourier," "Blurry But not Blind—after Stephen Malarmé," and "Sexual Healing Shift for Harassment." Each keystroke of these fonts generated not a letter, but a word or in some cases a phrase, conceptually related to the theme of each font. A work by Mez (Mary-Anne Breeze), *_the data][h!][bleeding texts_* consisted of remnants of email list performances in a idiosyncratic language system called "mezangelle," which included "computer

code flavored language, and net iconographs." Each of these works was fiction in the sense that it was textual artifice that could neither be described as poetry nor non-fiction, but neither could it be described as narrative in any of the modes that I was accustomed to. The artifice in each work had more to do with the material and conceptual relationships between language, human, machine, and network, than with plot or characters.

So I wondered (and I still wonder): is the experience of reading fiction fundamentally about being told a story? Perhaps there is an irresolvable tension between interactivity and one of the essential pleasures of story: bringing a sense of order or coherence to human experience which is itself less ordered, more fragmentary, and less tidy than experience as it is typically conveyed in print fiction. Perhaps the main reason we read fiction is to escape for a while into a controlled, arranged, ordering account of human experience, a relief from the burden of interactivity, from the responsibility of filtering our experience of the world which is thrust upon us in our everyday lives.

The electronic literary works submitted in the fiction category for the 2001 Awards challenged my idea of what could constitute fiction. For a given work to be fiction is a story necessary at all? Hypertext fictions already either discard or radically reformulate major aspects of fiction such as plot and character development. But here we saw complete abandonment of the idea that fiction should in some way be fabular. Fiction in this context had become a jarring mix of theoretical and critical discourse, a kind of "critifiction," one impulse of which was to materialize or enact theoretical concepts.

Jay David Bolter's *Writing Space* (1991) and George Landow's *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (1992) were early studies of digital literature

that largely focused on the relationship of hypertext to other forms of literature and approaches to literary study ranging from the oral tradition to postmodern theory and fiction. More recent work has focused on the materiality of electronic literature and on understanding the procedurality of works of electronic literature as text-machines. While I agree that it is tremendously important to realize that many works of electronic literature are computer programs functioning in network environments, with distinct material properties specific to that situation, the works in the *Collection* have really underscored for me the validity to one of the impulses of that earlier work, to consider electronic works as a response to or outgrowth of earlier avant-garde traditions. There is need for more critical analysis of the emerging genres of electronic literature in the context of literary and artistic movements of the 20th Century in more expansive way. Many of the works in the *ELC* implicitly or explicitly reference avant-garde traditions including Dada, Lettrism, Concrete poetry, Language poetry, Surrealism, Fluxus, the Oulipo, Postmodern fiction, and conceptual writing. These experimental traditions are being recast in contexts specific to networked computer. These works are computer programs, but they are also literature, with clear connections to literary forms of the recent past. If we do think in terms of genre, our understanding of the concept should be shaped by the context of those earlier movements.

Among the works included in the *Electronic Literature Collection*, there are a number of pieces that frustrate generic identification, and that challenge us to consider the borders of the literary. In her *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, N. Katherine Hayles notes that a number of the works in the *ELC* "have no recognizable words" and that by "calling these works 'literature,' my co-editors and I hope to stimulate questions about the nature of literature

in the digital era." Hayles goes on to propose a distinction between literature proper and "the literary," which she defines as "creative artworks that interrogate the histories, contexts, and productions of literature, including as well the verbal art of literature proper" (Hayles 2008: 4). In other words, some of the works in the *ELC* 1 engage in processes of signification, and one that engages with and refers to the context of literature, at the same time as they do not make direct use of the written word. Perhaps the clearest example of this is Giselle Beiguelman's *Code Movie 1*. The piece is a relatively simple Flash movie, with an electronic music soundtrack. The movie shows hexadecimal code moving across the screen while the music plays. The hexa code is that of a JPG image, which the viewer never actually sees. While the piece itself includes no human-readable code, it is foregrounding the relationship between inscription and the operations of the networked computer. Beiguelman notes that the "project interrogates the role of the code in the meaning construction and the new forms of translations that digital languages embody. It questions: Now, that the Cybertext confuses itself with the notion of Place (a web address, for example) and that the Image only reveals itself through a 'hyperinscription' (an URL), can we think in a poetics of the transcodification between medias and file formats?" (Beiguelman 2006). So is watching this Flash movie really reading? Certainly it is not on the level that the signifiers themselves are meant to carry any semantic meaning to the human reader. Bieguelman strips non-linguistic code out of its meaningful context, in order to make the point that a form of non-human-readable language underlies all forms of web media, including JPG images. This is a form of conceptual writing, in while the literary artifact itself does not include expressive language, by producing the work and placing it in a literary context, the author is expressing an idea about the nature and function of language in the digital era.

Jim Andrews work *Nio* is another included in the *Collection* that complicates the nature of literary signification. *Nio* is a sort of interactive instrument for letters and sound. In one part of the work, the reader can mix loops of sound, and lettristic animations, arranging their own live composition on the fly. Andrews writes, "Since the sounds are synchronized with the animations, *Nio* is, in part, an exploration of the tone of motion of language, of sound, a kind of lettristic dance, vortex of letters, an odd visual/sound poem" (Andrews 2006). In this piece, there are letters and phonemes, if not words. The author is creating an aesthetic and evocative experience. The a cappella sound loops sound a bit like the doo-wop sound of a barbershop quartet, and the author has asserted that the piece was made as a tribute to his father. There are established traditions in sound poetry, which the author may be referencing in creating an interactive piece that involves carefully ordered sounds and letters for interactive arrangement, which themselves do not directly express meaning. By denying us explicit semantic meaning, the work forces us to focus on a pure sound/visual/interactive nexus. *Nio* exemplifies poesies without words. *Nio* is one case where the "literary" aspect is less in the content of the work itself than the intentions of the poet. Andrews refers to himself as a poet, and refers the process of creating *Nio* as "writing." Who are we to deny him that? Is there a difference between writing poetry and writing code with artistic intention? Both are acts of inscription, both take place at the keyboard, and both in some way result in textual artificats.

Like many of the works included in the *Collection*, *Nio* is one that is enacted within the border zone of the literary, within the many colorful shades of the spectrum between literature and other art forms. Mary Flanagan's piece *[theHouse]* is one of several submissions of a type of kinetic poetry that might be called "architectural." The reader negotiates a 3D space, an abstract

house built of boxes and language. The short phrases that compose the text describe the painful claustrophobia of living in a house in which a relationship is breaking down. The poem uses this virtual architecture as an objective correlative for the situation described in the text. Like a number of other pieces in the *Collection*, in *[theHouse]* we see that the tradition of concrete poetry, which has been a mode of literary practice for centuries, is again being reinvented in the digital age.

In the latter part of this essay, I have touched on some of the challenges of trying to classify works of electronic literature, when the field itself is in the process of formation, of being defined. I focused on a few works that were pushing against the edges of the literary, in order to make the point that we cannot simply or easily adopt the terminology and genres of print literature in contextualizing, publishing, and distributing electronic literature. While electronic literature includes many elements of the literary tradition, it also includes practices from a number of other art forms and venues of cultural production: visual art, conceptual art, computation, gaming, music, performance, and other modalities of expression. As such, the field itself is a kind of moving target. It will likely look as different to us a decade from now as it does now from a decade ago. What is clear to me however it the importance of adapting one at least one practice from print culture, that of collecting works together and publishing anthologies. This is necessary in order both to make electronic literature more available to contemporary audiences, and begin to assemble a record for posterity. While the future of electronic literature is unknown to us, it is also the case that we are only beginning to comprehend the past of electronic literature and the contexts from which it is emerging in different cultures. Within Europe, for instance, decades of electronic literature production, in English, German, French,

Spanish, and other languages have gone largely undocumented and to a great extent are no longer available to us. It is my hope that the first volume of the *Electronic Literature Collection* and those that follow it will only be one of many attempts to collect and preserve a literary history which might otherwise evaporate with the passage of time.

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