Escaping the Prison House of Language:
New Media Essays in the Electronic Literature Collection, Volume 2

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The first Electronic Literature Collection was published in 2006. Including 60 works of electronic literature of diverse form and content, all published under one cover online and on a CD-ROM, the collection offered readers and educators a valuable resource, a set of works distributed freely under a Creative Commons license. The ELC provided teachers with a place where they could send students interested in exploring e-lit, and critics with a set of archived works around which they could gather their discourse – a set of common touchstones that served to help develop and refine a shared critical language about the emergent forms of literary practice.

The editors’ intention was not to publish a one-off anthology to form the basis for a canon but instead to launch a regular practice of periodically gathering, publishing, and making as widely available as possible curated collections of e-lit. A different collective of writers and critics, reflecting a different curatorial agenda, would edit each successive volume. In addition to reflecting a different aesthetic sensibility, each iteration of the Electronic Literature Collection would demonstrate changes in the nature of the artistic practice of electronic literature, serving as a sort of biennial exhibition for the field of electronic literature, showing transitions in literary and artistic practices in the field over time.

A biennial, of course, generally takes place every two years. We have been awaiting the publication of the Electronic Literature Collection, volume 2 for four years. The editorial collective for this second volume in the series: Laura Borras Castanyer, Talan Memmott, Rita Raley, and Brian Kim Stefans, have been hard at work curating, editing, and preparing ELC2 for online and DVD publication. I recently had the opportunity to preview the ELC2, which includes 63 works, and can verify that it is well worth the extended wait. While the contents of ELC2 reflect the same interest in representing a broad array of literary practices in new media as the previous volume, the editors’ interests in particular areas and themes results in a selection weighted more heavily to those types of work than others. The result is a very interesting mix. Stefans's interests in language poetry, lettrism, and conceptual writing, Raley's interests in “codework” – digital poetry that interrogates the interface of human language and machine language, and her interests in digital
manifestations of political discourse, Memmott's interests in the relation between film and various avant-garde writing practices, and in the development of writing practices that blend the ideas of poststructuralist theory within multimodal artifacts, Castanyer's interests in new representations of materiality and in broadly representing the work of European writers, have all contributed to the diverse selection of works in the ELC2.

The editors have provided a glossary/index of works by particular keywords, which provide some clues for readers interested in following thematic, generic, or conceptual paths through the collection. The keywords in this column include: Ambient, Animation/Kinetic, Appropriated Texts, Audio, Augmented Reality, CAVE, Chatterbot/Conversational Character, Codework, Collaboration, Conceptual, Constraint-Based/Procedural, Critical/Political/Philosophical, Database, Documentary, Ergodic/Interactivity/Participation, Essay/Creative Nonfiction, Flash, Games, Gender/Race/Sexuality, Generative, Hacktivist, Hypertext, Installation, Interactive Fiction, Java, Javascript, Locative, Mash-up, Memoir, Multilingual, Narrative, Network Forms, Non-Interactive, Parody/Satire, Performance/Performative, Place, Poetry, Processing, Retro, Shockwave, Stretchtext, Text Movie, Textual Instrument, 3D, Video, Virtual Environment, Visual Poetry or Narrative, and Wordtoy. There are many different threads to follow in this
labyrinth, enough to keep the critics busy, if not for the three hundred years James Joyce promised of *Finnegan's Wake*, then at least for the two or three years before the next volume of the ELC hits the streets.

I will pick up on some of these themes and explore them further in coming issues of *Vagant*, but for now will restrain myself to a very brief introduction to one of the more notable trends in this ELC: an interest in ways that techniques and practices of digital literature can be applied in online documentaries, essays, and other forms of nonfiction. Several of the most impressive works published in the ELC2, including Roderick Coover’s *Voyage into the Unknown*, Sharon Daniels and Eric Loyer’s *Public Secrets*, and David Clark’s *88 Constellations for Wittgenstein* (to be played with the *Left Hand*) powerfully illustrate the potential of electronic literary forms not only for fiction and poetry, but also documentary and essayistic forms.

Roderick Coover, a documentary filmmaker, contributes his interactive panorama documentary *Voyage Into the Unknown*. The work is one of several projects Coover has developed about the landscape, politics and ecology of the Grand Canyon and Colorado river region, including other interactive environments and the film *Canyonlands: Edward Abbey and the Great American Desert*. *Voyage into the Unknown* tells the 19th Century story of John Wesley Powell, the Civil War veteran who set out in 1869 with eight other explorers to be the first to navigate the unmapped Colorado River through its canyons in the desert. The reader experiences this work as a horizontal panorama, extending off the edges of the screen, representing the Colorado River. The panorama has the form of an abstract iconographic map. The map includes icons representing trees, observations, names, rock formations, and events and notes. By clicking on the various icons, the reader encounters a number of different texts about the expedition, about the history of Colorado River during that period, and about the nature, landscape, and ecology of
the ecosystem. Like many contemporary map or location-based information systems, *Voyage into the Unknown* enables its user to explore many different types of information simultaneously in one space. Coover pulls in information not only from Powell’s diary, which was published and widely distributed during the period, but also from the diaries of others involved in the expedition, contemporary newspaper accounts, popular songs and poems of the period and other materials. Throughout, as readers select different waypoints, they are addressed in the second person. Coover pulls readers into the narrative of the expedition, as we run the rapids and experience hardships such as destruction of the raft, the struggle with hunger, and the loss of crew members to the dangers of the river.

Public Secrets by Sharon Daniels and Eric Loyer is a project that addresses a more contemporary concern: the unmitigated growth of the American prison industrial complex. Daniels spent three years working with the nonprofit organization Justice Now, volunteering as a legal advocate for women incarcerated at the Central California Women’s Facility. Although the state of California has had a media ban in place since 1993 that prevents reporters from conducting face to face interviews with prisoners or using recording devices of any kind, because of her status as an advocate, Daniels was able to record conversations with a number of women inside the prison. She recorded and transcribed these conversations, and then tracked connections between them and between a number of texts ranging from political philosophy to essays about American crime and punishment, Guantanamo Bay, and other aspects of a society increasingly obsessed with security and increasingly invested in the protection of civil rights. In navigating through the work, the reader encounters a literal prison house of language. Pull quotes pop up in individual cells on the screen and as the reader selects them, other windows open which either include excerpts from contextualizing essays and theoretical works, or launch audio
recordings of the inmates recounting their experience of life inside the prison. Hearing the women speak in their own voices has the affect of humanizing the material, and grounding it. The prison industrial complex is no abstraction here, but the force that shapes and controls the existence of those living inside it. Eric Loyer’s innovative design visually communicates the senses of claustrophobia and despair that define the inmates’ lives.

88 Constellations for Wittgenstein (to be played with the Left Hand) by David Clark is one of the most impressive examples of a multimedia essay I have seen to date. The work is composed of 88 animations circling around themes related to the life and work of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom the work posits as a key figure in the intellectual history of the 20th Century, and whose work is used here as a lens to filter an understanding of modern life. This is not however a dry academic exercise or a glorified powerpoint lecture, but a rather mind-bending journey, driven by a narrator who seems at some points a documentary biographer and at others a particularly erudite intellectual conspiracy theorist. The work is multilinear, allowing the reader to “connect the dots” and move through the different vignettes by following linguistic and thematic connections that are laid out for us in the form of star maps. The connections are almost always interesting, if sometimes arbitrary. I had no idea for instance that Adolph Hitler and Ludwig Wittgenstein attended the same primary school; nor that Wittgenstein’s brother, after losing his right arm, commissioned compositions for one-handed piano players, which he played for the rest of his life; nor did I know that Wittgenstein attended lectures by Alan Turing at Cambridge. 88 Constellations spins webs of connections in attempts to bring some clarity, or perhaps to simply continue to further muddle, the thoughts and works of figures ranging from Charlie Chaplin to Sigmund Freud to Stanley Kubrick. Throughout, in its design and its content, the work uses Wittgenstein’s ideas about the limits of language and the understanding of intellectual discourse as a series of language games as a structuring concept. The visual aesthetic of 88 Constellations is also remarkable. The design style is sparse and subdued, using a palette mainly composed of black, white, and grays, but the
designer shows a great sense and appreciation of the power of iconography to render complex concepts comprehensible. Stock footage and clips from a number of different films is sampled very effectively. A number of the vignettes are also interactive and variable: as the reader types certain keys, different visual elements are launched or modified in response. *88 Constellations* is a rare work in which the narration, images, animations, icons, and user interaction all seem to bear equal weight and significance: one layer can’t simply be said to be illustrative of another. It is a truly multimedia work in which all of the elements are in conversation with each other, and offers a glimpse of some the directions that the genre of the essay will explore as it evolves further in the new media environment.