

Introduction to New Work on Electronic Literature and Cyberculture

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"Introduction to New Work on Electronic Literature and Cyberculture"
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Introduction to New Work on Electronic Literature and Cyberculture
Maya Zalbidea, Mark C. Marino, and Asunción López-Varela

Following the start of the wide use of computers in the 1980s, electronic literature has been established around the same time and within the larger field now called "digital humanities" we have seen not only the developing of a large corpus of electronic literature including poetry, but also the development of university programs, the archiving of electronic literature, international awards, and research projects. N. Katherine Hayles defines electronic literature as "generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitized, is by contrast 'digital born,' and (usually) meant to be read on a computer" (<<http://eliterature.org/pad/elp.html>>). In English some of the first such works were Judy Malloy's 1986 *Uncle Roger* <<http://www.well.com/user/jmalloy/uncle Roger/partytop.html>> and multimedia CD texts including Michael Joyce's 1987 *afternoon: a story*, Stuart Moulthrop's 1991 *Victory Garden*, and Shelley Jackson's 1995 *Patchwork Girl*. Since the birth of the world wide web in 1994, electronic literature developed further and today there is a large corpus available in all languages. Further, webcams in recent electronic literature is a also a tool that allows new kinds of reading experiences and that is similar to performance. Further, reading can be experienced by a reader alone who can see his/her own face on the screen becoming a protagonist of the story as it happens in Serge Bouchardon's and Vincent Volckaert's 2010 *Loss of Grasp* <<http://lossofgrasp.com>>. Or, one can read visual poems with one's own webcam in Amaranth Borsuk's and Brad Bouse's 2012 *Between Page and Screen* <<http://www.betweenpageandscreen.com>> or watch online a live performance in Judd Morrissey's and Mark Jeffery's 2014 *Reality ATOM-r: Anatomical Theatres of Mixed Reality* <<http://atom-r.com>>. Further, in social networks the use of Web 2.0 encouraged greater interactive possibilities and today such performances of hybrid spaces are acquiring a spectacular result, one that blurs the boundaries between human bodies and computational tools.

Of particular importance is the development of various artistic and scholarly organizations and associations for electronic literature and its research. For example, there are the *Electronic Literature Organization* <<http://eliterature.org/>>, the *Electronic Poetry Center* <<http://epc.buffalo.edu/>>, *Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice* <<http://elmcip.net>>, *Hermeneia* <<http://www.hermeneia.net/>>, *I ♥ E-Poetry* <<http://ilovepoetry.com>>, *Arquivo Digital da PO.EX* <<http://po-ex.net>>, *Ciberia* <<https://www.ucm.es/leethi/ciberia>>, *Literatura Electrónica Hispánica* <<http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/bib/portal/literaturaelectronica/>>, *Literatura Electrónica en España*

<<http://proxectole.es/>>, and many others. Outside the U.S. and Europe, in China despite censorship issues several websites archiving electronic literature have emerged beginning in the late 1990s. One of the most important ones, *Rongshuxia* <<http://www.rongshuxia.com/>>), was opened in 2000 by a man dying of cancer who also chronicled the last days of his life. Electronic literature in China is moving in the direction of employing the interactive features of the web to encourage audience participation and multi-authored texts rather than avant-garde interart experiments as in the West. The Chinese communitarian spirit is also behind the success of the micro-blogging site *Sina Weibo* <<http://us.weibo.com/gb>> and another interesting avant-garde poetry website in China is maintained by Michael Day at the University of Leiden <<http://leiden.dachs-archive.org/poetry/websites.html>>. Japan is a leader in transmedia storytelling with micronarratives on cellphones called *keitai shosetsu* ("thumb novel"), many of them hosted at the website <<http://maho.jp/>>. These works are written via text messaging and chapters consist of about 70-100 words each. In Australia, the ADELTA consortium <<http://uws.edu.au/eresearch/home/projects/adelta>> hosts the Australian Directory of Electronic Literature and Text-based Art at the University of Western Sydney, an important archiving initiative capturing some of the prolific artists from that country. Many works from Asia and Africa are coming from postcolonial contexts and authors are frequently expatriates and this is for instance the case of Trinh T. Min-ha, who immigrated to the United States from Vietnam and whose installations such as *L'Autre marche* <<http://trinhminh-ha.com/lautre-marche-the-other-walk/>> capture the passage of the Other into oneself, a course taken between the sounds and images of the installation and across several cultures of Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. And India has a growing game industry led by Dhurva Interactive established in 1997 <<http://www.dhruva.com/>> and they have become a top rated developer of mobile games.

In sum, electronic (digital) literature is developing in every corner of the world where artists explore the possibility of literary expression using computers (and the internet). As a result, innovations in this genre of literature represent unique developments and there is a growing corpus of scholarship about all aspects of electronic literature including the perspective of digital humanities. Contributors to *New Work on Electronic Literature and Cyberculture*, a special issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/>> explore theories and methodologies for the study of electronic writing including topics such as digital culture, electronic poetry, new media art, aspects of gender in electronic literature and cyberspace, digital literacy, the preservation of electronic literature, etc., as follows:

In "Towards a History of Electronic Literature" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/2>> Urszula Pawlicka investigates the development of theoretical frameworks of and for the study of electronic literature. Pawlicka's objective is show how electronic literature developed and posits that the field underwent to date three transitional phases including several sub-phases where certain aspects and perspectives overlapped. She argues that by distinguishing developments in different phases we can see that electronic literature moved from text to technotext, from text as decoding meaning to text as a process of information and information system, from an interpretation to experience, from visual perception to performativity, from close reading to hyper reading, and several others. The most relevant aspect of the development of electronic literature to date is the attention paid to both theoretical and applied aspects of the background technical base of digitality, namely coding and its importance just the same as the content of electronic literature. Pawlicka suggests that future forms of electronic (digital) literature include aspects of collaborative programming, new media and digital literacy, the development of literary laboratories, the continuation of transdisciplinary projects, and macro and systemic studies of and in digitality.

In "E-Literature, New Media Art, and E-Literary Criticism" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/3>> Janez Strehovec explores the commonalities between electronic literature and new media art. Rather than deploying the traditional conceptual apparatus of e-literary criticism directed first and foremost to the new media elements of e-literature, Strehovec takes into account approaches from current theories in the social sciences and humanities. In doing so, he draws upon examples of new media art as a practice in which the novel's social paradigms change the way of art-making and challenge the very function of art. Close-readings of some new media art projects including Bookchin's *Mass Ornament*, EDT's *Transborder Immigrant Tool*, and Jodi's *ZYX* demonstrate that new media art is questioning the very ontological status of the field in terms of abandoning aesthetic and artistic functions in favor of their functions of use. In contrast, e-literature's interactions with society challenge the intrinsic possibilities of this field, especially in terms of blurring the boundaries between forms and revolutionizing e-literature's means of expression.

In "Towards Digital Art in Information Society" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/4>> Montse Arbelo and Joseba Franco propose the development of the platform of a Network of Experimental Centers be formed by small groups of people who are qualified and who seek optimal operational effectiveness and who dedicate their resources to the production of digital content and we offer *artechmedia* <<http://www.artechmedia.org>> as a base point of departure. Such an international network in a collaborative structure based on national networks would make possible to coordinate existing resources to develop social networks, generate and promote content, engage in forums of discussion and creativity workshops, and establish collaborative links with universities, research centers, and producers of audiovisual content in cooperation with national and international centers.

In "Electronic Poetry and the Importance of Digital Repository" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/5>> Manuel Brito analyzes selected early digital repositories of electronic poetry. In addition to issues concerning efficiency and discursive practice, Brito's discusses the objectives, contents, and the funding of digital repositories. Brito argues that digital repositories promote poetry, enable networking and quick publishing of innovative poetry, they intensify the reading experience, and make a readership possible that is larger than that of print poetry. Networking, interaction, and web-based communication intensify the writing and reading experience while new modes of discourse are emerging continually. Not just passive consumerism promoted by an attractive presentation, digital repositories engage in developing aesthetics of poetry as a continual process of innovation. Their objectives, contents, and the funding of these e-repositories are not based on market-driven concepts or by academic purposes, but on the wish to allow for a true encounter with language. Importantly, in the case of new media publishing the figure of the editor has become responsible for reconciling novelty, lived cultural experience, and technical know-how.

In "A Survey of Electronic Literature Collections" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/6>> Luis Pablo and María Goicoechea describe characteristics and functions of collections of electronic literature and analyze descriptors used and the way information can be accessed. Based on their observations, Pablo and Goicoechea advocate a database structure which is flexible and can produce a dynamic archiving model as texts are registered and collected so that tags form a close set for the texts in the collection and this set can expand as new texts make new tags necessary. Further, the organization of tags into ever more complex taxonomies seems inevitable, since this provides an accurate description of knowledge accumulation with respect to the field's richness. They postulate that the study of tagging practices applied to digital works provides us with guidelines not only to describe texts of electronic literature, but also to demonstrate the wide variety of forms which a literary text can embody.

In "New Challenges for the Archiving of Digital Writing" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/7>> Heiko Zimmermann deals with the challenges of the preservation of digital texts. In addition to the problems already at the focus of attention of digital archivists, there are elements in digital literature which need to be taken into consideration when trying to archive them. Zimmermann analyses two works of digital literature, the collaborative writing project *A Million Penguins* (2006-2007) and Renée Tuner's *She... Fudge the Facts* (2008) and shows how the very ontology of these texts is bound to elements of performance, to direct social interaction of writers and readers to the uniquely subjective reading process, and to real-time access to data. Zimmermann posits that these features of the digital text poses further challenges for archiving and libraries.

In "The Meaning and Relevance of Video Game Literacy" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/8>> Jeroen Bourgonjon argues that video gaming deserves scholarly attention as a social practice and a site for meaning-making and learning. Based on an overview of contemporary trends in literacy and cultural studies, he argues that video games cannot be approached like traditional text forms. He contends that video games serve as an important frame of reference for young people and call for informed decision making in the context of culture, education, and policy. Bourgonjon provides an integrated perspective on video game literacy by employing theoretical insights about their distinctive dimensions and elements and situating them in Green's and Beavis's sociocultural 3D model of literacy in order to determine the operational, cultural, and critical aspects of video game literacy.

In "Gender Identity Construction through Talk about Video Games" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/9>> Sara Cole discusses the construction of gender identity in terms of experiences of digital media and interactive play. Digital literacy expresses, shares, and reaffirms gendered self-identification through experiences of video game play with narratives that either confirm or deny stereotypical biases. In-depth interviews were used to explore the effects of play practices on conceptions of masculinity and personal identity in males who grew up in the

1980s by focusing on a linguistic analysis of the pragmatics of their shared thoughts on play, fantasy, use of digital media, and violence. This investigation provides insight into the influences of fantasy and play on future perceptions of reality as well as cultural identification and in/out group formation. The study gives voice to these participants through a pragmatics of verbal discourse regarding gender identity construction as influenced by both childhood and adult experiences of interactive digital entertainment media.

In "Queer Hybridity and Performance in the Multimedia Texts of Arroyo and Lozada"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/10>> Ed Chamberlain examines the unconventional writing of Puerto Rican writers Rane Arroyo and Ángel Lozada. Arroyo and Lozada craft texts which can be interpreted as performances and these performative texts blend internet-based writings with more traditional genres including the novel and poetry. Arroyo's and Lozada's stylistic approaches exhibit a queer sensibility which resembles the way in which Latina/o queer people construct and perform their cultural identities. Chamberlain argues that such queer performances suggest that it remains impossible to achieve absolute truth in matters of identity and sexuality and that thus it becomes necessary to embrace the fiction and playfulness of everyday life whether it be online or face-to-face.

In "How Toni Morrison's Facebook Page Re(con)figures Race and Gender"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/11>> Beatriz Revelles-Benavente explores Morrison's Facebook page and comments on it. In 2010, Morrison opened a Facebook page where she received a large amount of comments and created debates and Revelles-Benavente analyses how these comments navigate questions of race and gender. Based on theoretical considerations about issues of race and gender in cyberculture and applied to the narratives posted on Morrison's Facebook page, Revelles-Benavente argues that the problematics of race and gender are relational and the question needs to be centered on the object of study as the relation between different forces instead of binary race and gender designations.

In "Electronic Literature and the Effects of Cyberspace on the Body"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/12>> Maya Zalbidea and Xiana Sotelo discuss how new technologies are facilitating the emancipation of subjugated subjects aimed at transforming unequal social relations through an intersectional and performative approach. This perspective is discussed through the exploration of the so-called intersectional approach described by Berger and Guidroz, Haraway's situated knowledges, and Butler's performative agency based on transgressions. Framed within the posthuman, post-biological deconstruction of social and cultural hierarchies, Zalbidea and Sotelo argue for the value of a conjuncture between postcolonial post-modern/post-structuralist literature and the field of feminist cultural studies. Based on previous theories of gender and bodies in cyberspace, Zalbidea and Sotelo develop ideas about bodies, gender, and anxieties, and how these theories may be illustrated metaphorically in electronic literature and new media art works.

In "The Racial Formation of Chatbots" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/13>> Mark C.

Marino introduces electronic literature known as chatbot or conversation agent. These programs are all around us from automated help centers to smartphones (e.g., Siri). These conversation agents are often represented as text or disembodied voices. However, when programmers give them a body or the representation of a body (partial or full), other aspects of their identity become more apparent—particularly their racial or ethnic identity. Marino explores the ways racial identity is constructed through the embodied performance of chatbots and what that indicates for human identity construction on the internet.

In "Electronic Literature in China" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/14>> Jinghua Guo

discusses how the reception and the critical contexts of production of online literature are different in China from those in the West despite similar developments in digital technology. Guo traces the development of Chinese digital literature, its history, and the particular characteristics and unique cultural significance in the context of Chinese culture where communality is an aspect of society. Guo posits that Chinese electronic literature is larger than such in the West despite technical drawbacks and suggests that digitality represents a positive force in contemporary Chinese culture and literature.

In "Teaching Digital Humanities in Romania" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss4/15>>

Mădălina Nicolaescu and Adriana Mihai describe a research project that sets out to promote digital humanities with an internet based platform in Shakespeare studies at the University of Bucharest. Texts have been collected and catalogued and the platform's technical construction is in construction. Based on the Shakespeare platform's content and presentation, Nicolaescu and Mihai propose participation strategies for involvement in the creation of a digital database that is both a research tool and a digital storytelling environment. The database is a collection of digitized translations of Shakespeare

in Romanian followed by participants' input in the form of critical and creative work which allows users to interact in the platform, expand its metadata, and produce multilinear narratives of interpretation.

In "Intermedial Strategies of Memory in Contemporary Novels"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/16>> Sara Tanderup discusses a tendency in contemporary literature towards combining intermedial experiments with a thematic preoccupation with memory and trauma. Analyzing selected works by Steven Hall, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Judd Morrissey and drawing on the theoretical perspectives of N. Katherine Hayles (media studies) and Andreas Huyssen (cultural memory studies), Tanderup argues that recent intermedial novels reflect a certain media nostalgia, celebrating and remembering the book as a visual, material object in the age of new digital media while also highlighting the influence of media development on our cultural understanding and representation of memory and the past.

In "Huang's and Donaldson's *Global Shakespeares* and the Digital Turn"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/17>> Tsu-Chung Su explores the related issues concerning the *Global Shakespeares Video & Performance Archive* <<http://globalshakespeares.org>> founded by Alexander C.Y. Huang and Peter Donaldson. Su traces the nature and history of the *Archive* with the view to look into the *raison d'être* of the two founders' concern with archives and archival performance, and to map out the origin and path of their project. Additionally, Su examines how authority and order which are exercised in the project with regards to its purposes, cybernetic laws, digital logics, and overall organizing principles concerning the *Archive*. Further, Su assesses the *Archive's* potentials, gains, and prospects, as well as its limits, difficulties, and disadvantages.

In "Pullinger's and Joseph's *Inanimate Alice* and Intercultural Engagement"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/18>> Ana Abril analyzes Kate Pullinger's and Chris Joseph's digital graphic novel and game. *Inanimate Alice* <<http://www.inanimatealice.com>> offers a model for online education environments and has been widely acclaimed. However, Abril's analysis suggests possible ways for improving the empathic and educational potential of the novel/game for interpersonal and intercultural benefit. Abril bases her analysis on the theories of human interpersonal communication and then applies these findings to *Inanimate Alice* and suggests improvement so that participants would be able to decide if they want to play from the viewpoint of their own culture or another one according to versions available.

In "Metalanguage in Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' and Biggs's *reRead*"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss5/19>> Asunción López-Varela discusses Simon Biggs's installation *reRead* <<http://www.littlepig.org.uk/reRead/reRead.htm>> in relation to Lewis Carroll's poem. López-Varela posits that both works draw attention to the functioning of self-reflexive semiotic mechanisms present in human discourse and gestures. Based on the examples of the poem and the installation, López-Varela discusses how the human mind creates narratological coherence out of random and recursive patterns and argues that it does so by including other media which enable formats beyond the textual and the iconic. Further, López-Varela discusses how we are pre-disposed to process any semiotic exchange in terms of spatiotemporal sequences and interpret signs with the help of prior knowledge gathered from intersubjective experiences.

For a bibliography of scholarship in digital humanities including electronic literature see Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Bibliography for Work in Digital Humanities and (Inter)mediality Studies." *Library Series, CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (2013-):

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/bibliographydigitalhumanities>>).

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