Review: *The Electronic Literature Collection Volume I: A New Media Primer*

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Abstract

This is a review of *The Electronic Literature Collection Volume I: A New Media Primer*.

In her online essay "Electronic Literature: What is it?" N. Katherine Hayles, long-time advocate and interpreter of elit, mentions her colleagues' frequent requests for recommendations for "the good stuff". The *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1* (*ELC*) that she co-edited with Nick Montfort, Scott Rettberg, and Stephanie Strickland presents a partial answer to that request, though the project was already underway when she joined the team. Rettberg, co-founder of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), was already developing the *ELC* with fellow ELO board members Montfort and Strickland. In addition to its release through the ELO website (http://www.eliterature.org/) and ELO-sponsored events, the *ELC* is also bundled with Hayles' new book *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* [Hayles 2008]. Certainly her exegeses of the collection, presented in her texts and talks, will serve to raise the profile of this digital anthology. As in any artistic field, critical attention is the key to the long term circulation of these works in that winding path from journal article to syllabus and back. The collection thus begins its life with an influential retinue, as Hayles and ELO critics work in tandem with the work to promote an understanding of the forms of electronic literature as it has redefined itself since the days of literary hypertext in the late 1980s.

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So, what is the "good stuff" of electronic literature? Given the variety of pieces assembled here, there is no simple description.

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Keyword: Variety

When the ELO decided to put the collection together, their organizing keyword was "variety". To interact with the sixty pieces is to experience their success in developing an enticing anthology particularly for course syllabi in electronic literature. The collection includes poetry, drama, and fiction rendered with sound, animation, and of course, that golden trait, "interactivity". The pieces use Shockwave, Flash, JavaScript, interactive programming languages (TADS and Inform) and HTML. The works are hyperlinked texts, animated poems, games, films, and new genres that have yet to be contained in any tidy taxonomy. The question "What is electronic literature?" quickly gives way to "What isn't?" as these editors produce not so much a genre as a network of pieces whose greatest common factor is their delivery media, the CD-ROM or the Internet. However, while the collection includes a powerful cadre of those multi-talented dilettante artist-programmer-coders working alone or in collaboration, the variety of the works does not derive from a variety of producers, especially with respect to social economic status and racial characteristics. Perhaps the ELO's efforts to freely disseminate the collection will provide a means of inspiring a wider variety of potential artists for the next volume.

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Available on both CD-ROM and online, the collection also offers multiple organizational structures for exploring the contents. The user can pursue the front-page, a matrix of thumbnails for each piece, which again highlights the heterogeneity of the pieces themselves. Alternately, the reader can examine the works by keywords, authors, or titles. "Keywords" offers a breakdown of the different forms, according to the genre of the work ("codework" or "wordtoy"), the medium or programming language ("Flash", "VRML"), the author ("women authors", or "collaborative"), or the tone of the

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work ("parody/satire"). Some of the keyword seem to strain to describe their collection. "Network Forms", for example, is rather loosely defined as works that "are structured" or "make use of the styles of network forms such as the personal home page, the FAQ…, the blog, the listserv,…or email". Clearly this categorization seems more folksonomic than taxonomic, describing based on a set of related features rather than formal requirements. Again, this less rigorous naming protocol reflects a much more inclusive attitude than one might find in an anthology of poetic forms, for example.

Amidst the collection, there are some works that transcend the collection itself and stand out as pillars of electronic writing. Such pieces have already garnered much critical attention. Most notable among these would be Judd Morrissey's *The Jew's Daughter*, Michael Joyce's *Twelve Blue*, Stuart Moulthrop's *Reagan Library*, Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia*, and Kate Pulinger's *Inanimate Alice*. When it does not include the "hits" of other megastars in new media, it often includes the visionaries with lesser-known works. Such pioneering artists include Shelley Jackson, author of the much critiqued *Patchwork Girl*, who has since largely moved on to print, codework artist John Cayley, and MD Coverly, author of *Califia*. Though syllabi have already enshrined these artists and their works as "electronic literature", the range of their forms, styles, and content perplex attempts to easily categorize these lexia, which is perhaps the central message of the *ELC*.

Varieties of Forms

Eliterati seem to cannibalize any electronic delivery venue they encounter. Perhaps the most obvious variety in the collection is menagerie of forms. Whether using natural language or computer languages, animation or games, the works offer a sense of the perpetual metamorphosis of electronic literature. Nonetheless, Flash and its precursor Shockwave are certainly dominant multimedia delivery systems. Descending from FutureWave Software's SmartSketch of the early 1990s, now produced and distributed by Adobe, this software that has been so dominant with online marketers and web designers has proven just as useful and contagious to eliterature. Whether allowing users to carve their own version of Michelangelo's David in Deena Larson's work or offering music, images, and voices in Ingrid Ankerson and Megan Sapnar's *Cruising*, Flash proves itself a malleable publication venue with seemingly endless possibilities to the elit artist. However, at the recent ELO/MITH the Future of Electronic Literature symposium, elit poet and tale-spinner Robert Kendall discussed his frustration with such a closed system in the open-source era. The strict seals on Flash's SWF files have sent many authors to more "open" forms. Jason Nelson makes his Flash files freely available for remixing. The desire to share and open these art forms reveals another common goal among these artists, the promotion of the field itself through the development and circulation of works that can be reworked.

Programming languages offer these artists a major alternative to proprietary production systems, such as Flash. Not surprisingly, hypertext, including HTML/DHTML serves as the lingua franca of many of the other works, but it is not alone in programming languages. Perhaps due to editor Nick Montfort's interests, interactive fiction, written in TADS and Inform, have a healthy representation, making up five of the sixty works, as opposed to say conversational agents, whose lone representative is actually also a work of interactive fiction, "Galatea" by Emily Short. This award-winning selection of interactive fiction demonstrates the ways in which these works refuse easy categorization even in the quite-recent genres they exemplify.

Written in 2000, using Inform, *Galatea* opens by leading the interactor into a room in which stands the figure of Galatea, who balls her hand in a fist and says, "They told me you were coming." Very quickly, the interactor will discover that he or she can speak back. Here, then, is a chatbot, a conversational agent, in the middle of an interactive fiction (IF). Of course, from Floyd the robot in Steve Meretzky's Infocom game *Planet Fall* (1983), there have been non-player characters with whom to interact. However, *Galatea* is neither a "traditional IF" nor a "traditional chatbot". If spelunking through *Adventure* (or *Colossal Cave Adventure*, 1976) launched the genre of IF, interrogating Galatea in a single room will seem markedly confined. If typing natural language input is the hallmark of conversational agents, chatters will feel a bit constrained by being forced to type "tell about" a subject or "ask about" a subject as the primary means of textual interaction. *Galatea* combines the genres but defies and re-imagines the conventions of both. By the same token, the works in this collection refuse to meet generic expectations and perhaps even refuse to be categorized in the first place, hence the organization of the works not by a top-down table of contents but by non-exclusive keywords. Readers can

choose their emphasis through the keywords, examining works by programming language, genre, or even gender of the authors, among other categories. Thus, readers interested in literary styles can find one set of categories, while programmers can pursue another. Of course, these last two emphases, the literary and the technological, prove to be competing poles in the collection and the electronic literature world at large.

Technique vs. Techne

One of the major questions facing electronic literature is what will be prioritized, the literary quality, which we might shorthand as the (post)humanistic resonances of a work of art, or the technical quality. Nowhere is that tension clearer than in the *ELC*'s capsule intros of the works themselves. In the description for "Twelve Blue", written by Michael Joyce, author of the first hypertext narrative, *Afternoon, a story* (1987), the editors write almost apologetically, "Although simple from a technical standpoint, the work tells a complex and enigmatic story of memory, desire, lust, truth, and consequences." Similarly, in the introduction to Alan Sondheim's *Internet Text*, the editors add, "These texts…are not multimedia productions or cybertext machines….Instead they document a long-standing online performance." Behind these justifications and apologia is a sense of obligation to serve up a collection of gizmos or, to borrow Shelley Jackson's word, "Wunderkammer", or cabinet of curiosities. In the introduction to Rob Wittig's *The Fall of the Site of Marsha*, "a comic romp that uses the form of the common early-web 'home page'," the editors note that Wittig's work "reflects less interest in using bleeding edge technology than in adapting literary forms to the vernacular styles of new media". Meanwhile, other pieces foreground the interface or the underlying processes. Of Dan Waber and Jason Pimble's "I, You, We", the editors call the piece "visually pleasing and quite readable". Few literary collections offer assurances of the "readability" of their texts. To interactors who have little expectation of what is Electronic literature, such "excuses" may not be necessary at all. Nonetheless, in the editorial rooms of electronic literature echoes the constant call for the readable through interfaces that are novel and, more critically, technologically rich.

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To identify this tension is not to say that artists must choose between them or that works cannot have both technological innovation and literary, or specifically textual, virtuosity. However, let us consider Michael Joyce's *Twelve Blue*. In this technologically-limited work, Joyce composes lines that net us: "He pulled the water over him like a blanket and slept, anchored in the gaze of an unknown woman and the girl who loved him." There are no Microsoft Certifications or technical requirements for implementing and appreciating the beauty of Joyce's prose with a style powerful enough to send less adept artists deeper into code and contraptions.

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The dual emphases of technology and the literary play out across the content of the collection as well. Technology is frequently a central theme and at least a minor trope in these works. Some emphasize technological history, as artists become archaeologists of media forms. Take William Poindstone's *Project for Tachistoscope*, a work whose title puns on the timed projection device whose flashing images it remediates, or recreates through another medium, in a Flash. Other works more prominently display their literary history. "Oulipoems" by Millie Niss and Martha Deed provide text-machines inspired by the French literary movement the Ouvroir de littérature potentielle. Emily Short's "Galatea" readapts the Pygmalion myth. Also, Tim Guthrie adapts Lance Olsen's novel *10:01* to a browseable and enthralling format.

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By the time a reader encounters Jason Nelson's *Dreamaphage* or Maria Mencia's *Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs*, readers may begin to wonder where the text has gone all together. Hayles has recently written and spoke about the inclusion of such texts, redefining electronic literature as that which redefines or makes us reconsider our relationship to language. Such works, she argues, require neither "natural language" nor text but a use of signs that helps us reimagine or reconfigure our relationship to sign systems of which our spoken language is only one. Such a move allows scholars of electronic literature to be broad in their scope while still maintaining a thread of continuity of purpose. Nelson himself has spoken about his own efforts as experiments in interface design [Nelson 2005]. Perhaps the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 1* can be seen as a literature of the interface. These poets are innovators of form; they are constantly in dialogue with their media.

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Despite this technological focus, the works manage to engage in a variety of political projects as well. Geniwate's generative poetry *Concatenation* calls up images of Middle Eastern conflict with *On the West Bank*, where "soldiers

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teach the grammar of war". Stuart Moulthrop's provocatively titled *Reagan Library* explores memory loss in evocation of its Presidential namesake, though its text offers a less-directly political game space. Nonetheless, in the model of the avant-garde, these pieces become political more through the *Verfremsdungseffekt*, when they break the spell of the seamless interfaces, when they reveal the ways in which our interfaces hail us. If the rest of the world is using Flash to create sleek gosh-wow splash pages, creating illusions of so-called "transparent" interfaces, this group of artists is trying to dislodge the interactor from such a comfortable position. As a trace of this subversive movement, one of the *ELC* keywords, Hacktavist, which combines hacking with activism, has no works associated with it.

Sharing the Wealth

The ELO collection promotes the sharing of this electronic literature among artists, educators, and audiences. While the production of the CD-ROM seems to be a gesture toward the world of books and discrete objects that can be placed in libraries and on shelves, Creative Commons licensing (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5) puts the collection and copyright in the hands of the "wreaders" (writer readers) as Jim Andrews calls them in his "author's description" of "Nio". The No-Derivative Works restriction prevents corporations from taking this content and developing a viral marketing version of, say, *Lexia to Perplexia*. However, the restriction also prohibits a new net artist from transferring their own deck of words into, for example, *Stud Poetry*, a piece which rewires a poker game to generate poetry. Nonetheless, a user could request permission for derivative works, which is just the kind of community-building the Electronic Literature Organization tries to foster. These works are meant to spread as seeds for future projects from whatever audience it can reach. ¹⁴

Hardly an all-ages anthology, though, the *ELC* is not appropriate for all audiences. Much electronic literature follows the model of experimental writing of the New Novel and beyond with a no-holds-barred approach to content. Content is often sexually explicit, emblematized by such work as Alan Sondheim's *Internet Text*, with text files documenting explicit sex acts. Surprisingly, the collection includes a "Children's literature" keyword, denoting "a work directed to an audience of children". However, *Inanimate Alice* is the only example. On the other hand, many works play with images of childhood for the reflection of adults, for example Donna Leishman's animated "RedRidinghood", a revision of the children's tale with a look into the troubled interior of its characters. Shelley Jackson's *My Body a Wunderkammer* offers reflections on the character's breasts and penis. Net nannies and educators of younger students (K-8) will no doubt need to hold the keys for these wondrous rooms. ¹⁵

What's Not in the Collection?

While the collection is diverse in its objects and includes a menagerie of interfaces and kinds of semiotic communications, the roll call of authors maintains a certain demographic homogeneity. These works, developed in a literary environment after the advances of pluralistic and inclusive curricula, offer little in the way of cultural diversity. Perhaps as a symptom, racial representations tend to be white. Questions of race become blurred in questions of post-human races. ¹⁶

At this point in the argument, the burden of proof typically falls on the critic to demonstrate the lack of diversity. I do not have access to the family trees of all of the contributors, but having met or encountered most of the authors at conferences, I can at least attest to a lack of phenotypical diversity. Perhaps an easier place to look is in the texts themselves, specifically at the characters represented, visually or otherwise. With respect to the visual representations, white-hued characters abound, as in Marsha of Rob Wittig's piece or Dona Leishman's Deviant and *Little Red Riding Hood*. Those who study traditional print literature have long-since theorized the effects of literary collections that seem to exclude various audiences. Surely, the ELO can only choose works from those who submit. However, the lack of diversity in the authors reflects the digital divide between these groups and historically (and apparently still) underrepresented groups, such as African Americans. ¹⁷

The collection itself may serve to remedy part of this problem, for despite the reported "global" reach of the World Wide Web, literacy in electronic literature typically requires a one-to-one communication between artist-critic and audience. Again without tracing out the Facebook networks, I should note that there are typically fewer than six-degrees of ¹⁸

separation between the various elit artists, since many create elit in the context of electronic literature courses and many of the artists included have been involved with ELO. The number of people with the time, training, and access to create these artistic works is quite small and were introduced to the form by another person, rather than a random web search. To an extent, electronic literature is a guild-based art form, one that requires mentoring just as it requires evangelists. The *ELC* may serve as a useful self-starter kit for those who do not have direct access to one of the initiated, especially since the collection is available free online.

Also lacking were sufficient examples of elit beyond Europe and the United States. Another topic at the ELO symposium was how to foster more relations with artists outside the English-speaking word and in other parts of the globe. Artists such as Colombia's Jaime Alejandro Rodriguez Ruiz, whose narrative work *Golpe de Gracia* warrants a place in a truly representative anthology. Montfort mentioned his own regrets about the absence of works from other languages but explained that the editors agreed they could not authoritatively evaluate non-English works without having an editor with mastery of that language. [19]

Like many of the works it has collected, the *ELC* evolved from constraints. The more general constraint, according to Montfort, was to publish only works that could be run from a CD and did not require either outside servers or material instantiation, such as those needed for installations and performance pieces. For consistency, the editors decided not to include any pieces that merely documented a performance or work as opposed to presenting the work itself. According to Montfort, questions subsequently arose about the need or relevance of physical copies of the *ELC* when even CD-ROMs are becoming cultural artifacts. Why put a collection on a CD when it is available on the web? Still, if they had planned to distribute online as well, why set the seemingly antithetical boundary of the CD-ROM? [20]

The answer is preservation. In an age where web pages disappear faster than yesterday's Firefox plugins, it is increasingly important to preserve at least some of these works off the web. This archival work has been another major project of the Electronic Literature Organization, the Preservation, Archiving, and Dissemination (PAD) project. The *ELC* will no doubt serve all of those aims, especially as future volumes follow. Hayles reports that she expects future *ELC*'s to appear on a biennial basis. With this work, the *ELC* editors reveal themselves to be part of a much more established tradition of literary communities by celebrating, preserving, and advocating forms that will challenge, inspire, and, for the time being, compile. [21]

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