

## Curating Electronic Literature as Critical and Scholarly Practice

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### Abstract

Exhibits focusing specifically on Electronic Literature have been mounted at galleries, libraries, universities, convention spaces, and parks and other outside venues. The Electronic Literature Organization's 2012 Media Art Show, for example, hosted exhibits in five different locations in Morgantown, including a community arts center, local gallery, the university library, a department's conference room, and the city's amphitheater, while the MLA 2012 and 2013 exhibits were held at the Washington State and Hynes convention centers, respectively. The Library of Congress, the most important repository of books in the U.S., hosted *Electronic Literature & Its Emerging Forms* in April 2013 while Illuminations gallery at University of Ireland Maymooth featured an exhibit of electronic literature in March 2014. This range of venues suggests a flexibility and appeal of electronic literature that is both scalable and broad. With these qualities in mind, this article outlines the various exhibits of electronic literature that the author has curated in order to highlight the two main challenges facing all scholars curating digital — that is, the challenge of availability and the challenge of presentation.

### Introduction



Figure 1.

Beginning with the *Visionary Landscapes Media Art Show* held in conjunction with the Electronic Literature Organization's (ELO) 2008 conference, I have undertaken alone, or in collaboration with others, nine exhibits of electronic literature held in galleries, libraries, art centers, and academic settings. The aim of these endeavors has been to explore curating as a mode of critical and scholarly practice as well as to raise awareness of the art form within academe and beyond into the public sphere. While my curatorial practice generated from training in media art, I have carried it through into the humanities where curation now figures as one of four "fundamental activities at the core of Digital Humanities" [Burdick et al. 2013, 17]. Curation, described by the authors of *Digital Humanities*, as "the selection and organization of materials in an interpretative framework, argument or exhibit," allows for "artifacts [to] be seen being shaped by and shaping complex networks of influence, production, dissemination, and reception, animated by multilayered debates and historical forces" [Burdick et al. 2013, 17–18].

Electronic literature is a challenging art form to curate. It is described as “born digital works” [ELO 2014] that may involve visual, sonic, kinetic and kinesthetic modalities, and possess, to varying degrees, literariness. The common denominator of all works of electronic literature is that it is computational. This means that it generally develops in concert with the technology at hand. For example, commercially available works in the U.S., like Judy Malloy’s *Uncle Roger*, became available in the late 1980s on floppy disks. As CD technology later became prevalent, works published on floppy disks migrated to CDs, like Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*, while new works, like Megan Heywood’s *Of Day, Of Night*, were developed especially for this new technology. The rise of the browser gave birth to net-based works, like Dan Waber’s *Strings*, that were freely available to audiences with access to the internet. With each new technology came the danger of rendering the works produced with the previous technology obsolete. Even works produced for the web with Flash software as recently as 2007 are in danger of becoming inaccessible as mobile devices overtake the desktop market. This situation has brought to the forefront two overarching questions relating to curating works of electronic literature: First, “in this age of ubiquitous computing where net-based electronic literature is available on the web and, so, *anytime* — and now with wireless technology, *anywhere* — how can a curator make exhibits mounted in brick and mortar exhibit space vital?” Second, “in light of rapidly changing technology where platforms and programs are rendered obsolete within mere years, what is the best way for a curator to present electronic literary works produced on systems that have been rendered obsolete?” The former question suggests, what I call, a “challenge of availability”; the second, the “challenge of presentation.” This essay answers these two questions and presents a detailed description of exhibits I have undertaken, focusing on the way in which they helped to glean new knowledge about the art form as objects of study and expand electronic literature within academe and beyond.

## The Challenge of Availability

The challenge of availability for curating net-based electronic literature lies in the fact that it involves digital objects whose natural habitat is the digital space of the web. Exhibits I have curated, for example, offer works that are linked from the artist’s own site or some sort of online archive or database. One can just as easily access them from the comfort of one’s own home or office without even needing to visit a museum, gallery, or library to experience them. Yet because of the unique presentation and interpretation that a curated exhibit can offer, viewers can enhance their understanding of electronic literature when they experience it in conjunction with other exhibited work and in community with other viewers. In fact, those of us who grew up playing video games are primed to interact with digital objects in the presence of others in physical space. This experience can be extended beyond gaming into other forms of interaction with digital objects, like works of electronic literature exhibited in a gallery or library. This line of argument follows that of Vince Dziekan, Curator of *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, who argues that curators can combine “stag[ed] virtual experiences” with “events that bring values, beliefs . . . into the public domain” [Dziekan 2012, 63]. He arrives at his view through Mieke Bal’s notion of multimediality [Dziekan 2012, 63] and André Malraux’s “museums without walls” [Dziekan 2012, 64], predicting that “contemporary [venues] of the future will exhibit the virtual and the real alongside one another, crossing and overlapping each one’s boundaries, creating an amazing visual and interactive experience within and without walls” [Dziekan 2012, 66]. Multimediality, in this context, implies a shift from exhibit venues as “an arena for contemplation of the unique artwork and its aesthetic immediacy to staging virtual experiences” [Dziekan 2012, 63] while “the museum without walls” suggests that “the primary value of artworks . . . no longer reside[s] in them as physical objects.” They can be regarded as “moments of art” rather than “works” of art [Malraux 1974, 55].

In *The Tate Handbook*, Iwona Blazwick and Simon Wilson build on the idea that much is gained when approaching art as a system that involves a synergistic relationship among the works, the space, visitors, and curator. As they tell us, “[w]orks of art are rarely encountered in isolation” but rather “are experienced in relation to each other and articulated by the architectonics of a building and the unconscious choreography of other people” (qtd. in [Dziekan 2012, 31]). Synthesizing these ideas, Dziekan argues for a “dialectical approach” to curating that

move[s] away from what might be termed as a broadcast model of distribution (entailing a one-way communication approach) by introducing degrees of openness (access, participation) and feedback (exchanges, transactions). . . . This shift entails ideological choices that challenge the [museum’s, gallery’s, etc.] ability to respond to a changing mandate, from one founded on its presentation role to that of providing an infrastructure for aesthetic experience. [Dziekan 2012, 70]

In effect, Dziekan envisions a “black box” associated with performance and action rather than a “white cube” associated with emptiness and neutrality [Dziekan 2012, 68]. For him, multimedial exhibits are designed to be experiential, participatory, and interactive, a space for “developing critically and creatively upon the dialectical relationship between virtuality and the art of exhibition” [Dziekan 2012, 70]. Seen in this light, multimedial design offers an approach to curating that provides a strong foundation for exhibiting digital native objects that are readily accessible online like net-based electronic literature.

I began thinking about the challenge of availability in 2009 when designing the curatorial plan for the exhibit, *mediartZ: Art as Experiential, Art as Participatory, Art as Electronic*. For example, one of the works I selected for exhibit, *This Is Being Sexy* by Doug Gast, is a web project that includes digital prints that interrogates the “connection between object and symbol” (Gast, *This Is Being Sexy*), using the notion of what *being sexy* means to each of us as the basis for exploration. The work encouraged visitors to send in photos of themselves that would, then, be printed out and added to the exhibit. Along with participatory works like Gast’s, I also hosted events that aimed to extend the conversation about the art through curator’s and artists’ talks during the run of the show.

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Figure 2.

I followed a similar strategy at another exhibit, *Electronic Literature & Its Emerging Forms*, held at the Library of Congress, where my co-curator Kathi Inman Berens and I programmed artists’ readings in the exhibit space during the lunch hour and hosted a keynote and panel discussions at the closing of the show. We also encouraged audience participation and interaction at the various stations we had designed for the exhibit. At a Creation Station, for example, visitors could produce concrete poetry on an old typewriter, an activity that helped to emphasize the concrete poetry they had viewed at the Context Station. All of these elements served to build experiential, participatory, and interactive

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components of an exhibit whose electronic literary works were found online and, so, were readily available beyond the walls of the Library of Congress.

## The Challenge of Presentation

My second question focuses on obsolescence and the challenges it poses for presenting works in exhibits — what I refer to as the “challenge of presentation.”

Christiane Paul addresses this issue for media art in her seminal essay, “The Myth of Immateriality.” Here she reminds us that “the digital is embedded in various layers of commercial systems and technological industry that continuously define standards for the materialities of any kind of hardware components” [Paul 2007, 252] and suggests that the constant upgrades of hardware and software may be addressed, in varying degrees of practicalities, by collecting technologies (hardware and software) for the purpose of display, emulating code on newer systems, and migrating works to the next version [Paul 2007, 269]. We can extrapolate much from her ideas but need to be aware of the unique aspect of electronic literature as it has emerged with its own theories and methods. Paul’s view that the “lowest common denominator for defining new media art” is “its computability” [Paul 2007, 253] bears attention in that it signals a difference in aesthetics between media art and electronic literature and explains why she values one strategy (emulators) over others (collecting and migration). Unlike media art where “media” is anchored in the tradition of cinema and “art” is associated with terminologies found in fine art and performance, electronic literature generates from a wide variety of disciplines and practices, such as creative writing and media art, but also Digital Humanities, which itself is described as a “mode of scholarship and institutional units for collaborative, transdisciplinary, and computationally engaged research, teaching, and dissemination” [Burdick et al. 2013, 122]. Additionally, electronic literature embraces the technological origins of both coding and writing technologies, declaring this heritage in its genres’ naming convention, such as “hypertext fiction” or “kinetic poetry.” Computability — functions made manifest by characters expressed in written code and which drives the words, images, video, animation, sounds, etc., of the work *is* the point — *is* the common denominator connecting hypertext fiction with flash poetry, generative poetry with interactive fiction.



Figure 3.



So, what *is* the best way to present electronic literary works produced on systems that have been rendered obsolete? To answer this question, I turn to Judy Malloy's database narrative, *Uncle Roger*, begun in 1986 and published on the *ArtCom Electronic Network* located in the WELL ("Whole Earth 'Lectric Link") in 1987. It was contemporary with the Apple IIE and was, in fact, produced on this model. Version 1.0 was originally written in BASIC and delivered as a serial novel comprised of 100 lexias over the network. The version that was eventually sold commercially through the *ArtCom* catalog, however, was Version 2.0. It was made up of three 5 ¼ floppy disks on which Judy organized the material from 100 lexias of the previous version into three parts: "A Party at Woodside," "The Blue Notebook," and "Terminals." Version 2.0 made it possible for readers to navigate the story by selecting and typing keywords on the command line. Each combination would result in a lexia or series of lexias relating to the keywords typed. Typing "David" followed by "Jenny" in the next query, for example, brings up episodes about the relationship between these two people: David's messy apartment that Jenny recalls, the picture of David's former lover that Jenny tears into tiny pieces and places back into his wallet.

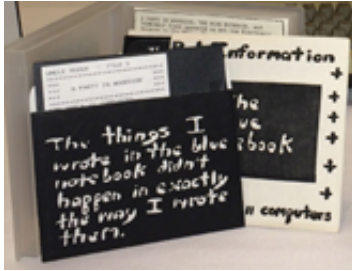


Figure 4.

Malloy sold Version 2.0 from her home as a hand-made artist package. As far as she knows, only three copies of the complete work exists, two that she donated to Duke University along with other materials that now comprise the Judy Malloy Collection and one divided, at the moment, between Malloy and me. Recognizing that people do not generally keep Apple IIE computers lying around their homes and offices, Malloy produced a web version in 2012, referred to as "Version 3.0," that runs on contemporary computers.<sup>[1]</sup> However, for me to present the Version 2.0 at the *Pathfinders* exhibit at the Modern Language Association conference in Chicago, IL in January 2014, I was required to ask Malloy to lend me the floppy I was missing ("Terminals") and, then, ship my Apple IIE to Chicago in order to show the work. Having access to *Uncle Roger* online sounds like a better solution to the problem of shipping a vintage computer across the U.S. and risking losing a rare work of electronic literature in the mail, but let's step back for a moment and think about the qualities of the work that may be lost if I blithely present Version 2.0 on any Apple IIE or Version 3.0 on a contemporary computer without thinking critically in advance about my choices.

*Uncle Roger* centers on the semi-conductor chip industry of Silicon Valley of the 1980s, a time in which floppy disks and Apple IIE computers with its black screen and green dot matrix type were familiar technologies. This particular computer is one of the most robust that Apple ever produced, lasting 11 years on the market. When Malloy began posting *Uncle Roger* on the WELL, the computer was only three years old. In fact, Malloy wrote *Uncle Roger* on a version of the Apple IIE that constrained her lines to 50 characters, resulting in a narrative poem and Malloy finding herself a narrative poet [Malloy 2013]. Later iterations of the computer cause the lines to wrap in ways Malloy did not plan for them to, but Version 3.0 running on a contemporary computer keeps the line lengths in tact. What is lost in moving to the newer version, however, is the look and feel of the period — the cultural context of the work itself. On the circa 1988 Apple monitor, the aesthetic of computer and story design meet seamlessly, the time-stamp of the work's technology making sense in the context of the material presence of the computer. Thus, in showing *Uncle Roger* at the *Pathfinders* exhibit at the MLA where over 5000 literary scholars convene, I needed to be aware that I was doing more than showing content of a work — I was actually providing a context for understanding and interpreting it.

Additionally, as curator I am taxed with caring about (*curare* literary means "to care") the unique features of *Uncle Roger*, such as its interactivity and ability to compel audience participation. In fact, the work may very well be one of the first social media narratives, presaging twitterature and other familiar contemporary forms today. With Version 1.0 Malloy posted one to two lexias every day, in serial style, to friends in her network, who then responded by chatting with

her about the story and riffing off to other topics. “Great stuff, Judy,” one reader wrote on December 2, “the ideas and the content are both up to ridiculously high standards. Thanks for the fresh air.” Another: “What jacket are you wearing?” [Malloy 1987]. This means that readers of both Versions 2.0 and 3.0 are missing a crucial feature of the work found in Version 1.0.

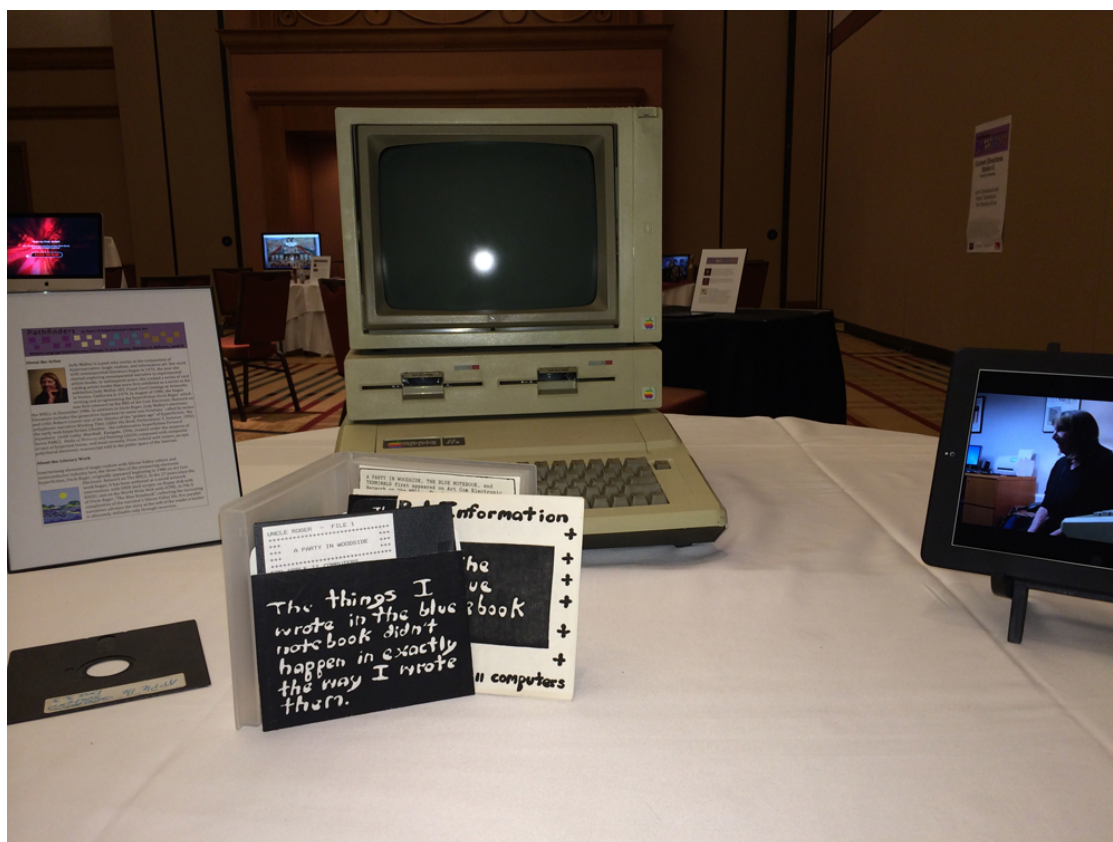


Figure 5.

Translation theory holds that translation is ultimately a betrayal of the text by the translator [Keeley 2013, 54]. Tautologically speaking, the best we can do to bring a work to a reader is just our best [Weaver 1989, 119]. So, to exhibit Malloy’s work, I did indeed ship my Apple IIe computer to Chicago since that particular computer wraps the text properly and provides a better cultural context for the work than showing the web version on the Mac Minis or iMacs I generally use for exhibits. I also showed the videos from Malloy’s interviews that talk about the development of the work and, so, situate it in context to its cultural legacy.

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## Background on the Exhibits

Because this essay also aims to raise awareness of curating as a form of scholarship, I next provide a detailed look at the various exhibits of electronic literature I have curated over the last six years, starting with the 2008 Electronic Literature Media Arts Show, *Visionary Landscapes*.

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### *Visionary Landscapes*

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Co-curated with John Barber, *Visionary Landscapes* took place from May 29 to June 1 in Vancouver, WA and was organized in conjunction with the Electronic Literature Organization conference, which Barber and I also chaired for the organization. A juried show, it consisted of three different venues: North Bank Artists Gallery located in downtown Vancouver featured “electronic literature exhibits” by 17 artists or artist teams; the Fireside Room at Clark College featured net art and videos by, again, 17 artists or teams; the Firstenberg Student Commons at the host university — Washington State University Vancouver (WSUV) — featured early works of electronic literature created by 18 different artists and produced prior to the introduction of the internet browser. An invited show, this third exhibit utilized vintage

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computers and media that were either part of my personal collection or lent to me by colleagues. For the two juried shows, we received entries from 120 artists, of which the judges selected 34.



Figure 6.

The choice of venues was purposeful. The gallery, normally used to showcase fine art, provided the opportunity to present electronic literature as both visual and sonic art forms. Until our show, North Bank had never featured media art of any kind. Its location downtown, with good foot traffic, made the work accessible to a public unfamiliar with electronic literature. The Clark College and WSUV meeting rooms, usually home to students and faculty congregating between classes, placed electronic literature squarely in an informal academic setting. The WSUV exhibit, with its vintage Macintosh computers and docents standing ready to educate visitors about the work, especially, received much attention and served as the catalyst for the article about the conference and exhibit that ran on the front page of the weekend section of the *Columbian* newspaper.

Another important aspect of the three exhibits was the robust collateral materials that accompanied them. The exhibit's website provided information about the artists' works and venues. Designed by local artist, Jeanette Altmann and coded by Barber, the website offered a good account of the event, from the artists to the works and continues to serve as the exhibit's archival site now indexed in both the Electronic Literature Organization's *Directory* and ELMCIP's *Knowledge Base*. We also developed a catalog for the early electronic literature exhibit that documented the types of computers platforms on which the works were showcased as a way of helping visitors to the exhibit to understand the material aspect of the practice underlying the art. The desire to promote electronic literature to a new audience also led to opening the exhibit to media artists and art forms that were new and emergent. In that vein, we accepted and showcased, along with animated narratives, flash poetry, hypertext fiction and the like, sound and video installations, "twitterature," and VJ/DJ performances. The fact that we referred to the exhibit on the website and conference materials as the "media art show" encapsulates this strategy.

mediartZ



# mediartZ

From October 2-31, 2009 a month-long celebration of media art at North Bank Artists Gallery, co-sponsored with the Digital Technology & Culture Program at Washington State University Vancouver

Mark Amerika  
Jeannette Altman  
Alan Bigelow  
Jim Bizzocchi  
Christopher Dougeris  
Brian Evans  
Doug Gast  
Doug Jarvis  
Will Luers  
Reza Safavi



Figure 7.

A year later, in 2009, interested in the impact of the online presence of art, art catalogs, and exhibits, I mounted *mediartZ: Art as Experiential, Art as Participatory, Art as Electronic*, which I discussed previously in this essay. An invited show held at North Bank from October 2-31, *mediartZ* featured 10 media and electronic literature artists whose video, animated narratives, sound work, and net art found online or whose interactive live performances appeared as documentation on the web. Interactive work and live performances were also part of the exhibit. As such, the exhibit made the argument that in this era where the art we choose to curate can already be accessed online, what makes an exhibit of media art and electronic literature compelling is the way the curator designs the exhibit [Grigar 2013]. In that regard, the show included live performances, audience participation through social media and other technologies, artists' talks, and lectures, to name a few strategies. The kick off party of 450 people brought in one of the largest audiences for any event at the gallery.

This was the first exhibit in which I applied curatorial approaches commonly associated with fine art shows to an exhibit that highlighted electronic literature and media art. Unlike *Visionary Landscapes* where I placed computers on tables and made chairs available for "reading" work, *mediartZ* featured computers on pedestals normally used to hold works of sculpture. I provided my first curatorial statement in association with an exhibit and published it in the catalog I produced for the show. These elements were intended to connect electronic literature to media art but more importantly to promote both as art forms to a new audience, one who may not have readily viewed them as art.

*Electronic Literature*





Figure 8.

A year and a half later, I co-curated, with Lori Emerson and Kathi Inman Berens, *Electronic Literature* at the Modern Language Association 2012 convention. The show was a large undertaking that aimed to make a statement about literature in the 21st century, a time in which computing devices and electronic media had become both ubiquitous and well-integrated into the fabric of contemporary culture. Envisioned as an invited show, it ran for three days in the Washington State Convention Center in downtown Seattle, WA where the 5000+ members of the MLA converged for their annual meeting. The exhibit featured:

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160 works by artists who create literary works involving various forms and combinations of digital media, such as video, animation, sound, virtual environments, and multimedia installations, for desktop computers, mobile devices, and live performance. The works presented at this exhibit have been carefully selected by the curators because they represent a cross-section of *born digital* — that is, works created on and meaningfully experience through a computing device — from countries like Brazil, Canada, Australia, Sweden, the UK, the US, and Spain, and highlight literary art produced from the late 1980s to the present. Thus, the exhibit aims to provide humanities scholars with the opportunity to experience, first-hand, this emergent form of literature, one that we see as an important form of expression in, as Jay David Bolter calls it, this “late age of print.” [Grigar and Inman Berens 2013]

Named *Electronic Literature* in order to introduce the term to a potentially new audience, the exhibit coincided with the 20-year anniversary of the first session held at the MLA on the topic of electronic literature, a panel, entitled “Hypertext, Hypermedia: Defining a Fictional Form,” that featured Terry Harpold, Michael Joyce, Carolyn Guyer, Judy Malloy, and Stuart Moulthrop.

Emerson, Inman Berens, and I set four goals for the exhibit:

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- Introduce scholars to a broad cross-section of born digital literary writing, both historic and current
- Provide scholarship and resources to scholars for the purpose of further study of Electronic Literature
- Encourage those interested in the creative arts to produce Electronic Literature
- Promote Electronic Literature in a manner that may encourage younger generations to engage with reading literary works

The exhibit was, for me, the response to my own call to action issued in the article, published in *ebr* in 2008, “Electronic Literature: Where Is It?,” in which I challenge scholars “to bring elit to the classroom, to help promote it in the contemporary literary scene, and support artists who produce it so that it can foster and bolster literary sensibilities and literacies of future generations” [Grigar 2008]. But formulating an exhibit that would, indeed, reach these goals, especially at the MLA where the notion of an exhibit of literary art was new and many of the attendees had never before experienced electronic literature, required a thoughtful strategy. We curators were, therefore, tasked with educating an

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audience of literary scholars, from classicists to contemporary literary theorists, about electronic literature and with providing ready access to the various works and scholarship surrounding electronic literature so that there were few, if any, impediments to including it in classroom teaching and research activities. This meant we had to provide a robust website, with whole pages devoted to “Scholarship,” “Resources,” and the “Works” themselves, as well as curatorial statements that provided insights into the curatorial design and the scholarship surrounding the works.



Figure 9.

Additionally, the new audience for whom we were designing the exhibit required us to rethink the language we used for describing and organizing the show. In structuring the exhibit, for example, we combined concepts found in fine art with those common to Digital Humanities scholars, whom we viewed as our mostly likely primary audience. This approach resulted in the works being divided into the three categories we named “Works on Desktop,” “Mobile-Geolocate Works,” and “Readings and Performances.” Moreover, instead of grouping works within these categories by genres common to electronic literature (e.g. hypertext poetry, interactive, fiction, generative text), we organized them on Computer Stations called, for example, “Experiments with Form,” “Multimodal Narratives,” “Multimodal Poetry” and “Literary Games.” The Computer Stations were comprised of gallery pedestals that were meant to signal to visitors that they had entered into an art space. A large poster providing the list of works found on each computer station was placed in close proximity to its corresponding station. Trained undergraduate docents were on hand to meet visitors and assist them with the computers and/or the literary works. A gallery count, a common practice at art galleries, was kept to track visitors. Members of *Invisible Seattle*, an artists’ collective active in Seattle during the 1980s and that produced in 1983 the “first crowdsourced novel” [Inman Berens 2013], attended the exhibit and provided the original costume for one of the docents to wear. This performance, in keeping with the spirit of the collective, brought a lot of attention and excitement to the exhibit. We also held an evening of readings and performances by 10 artists or teams of artists at the

local literary center, Hugo House.

A report, published later at *Authoring Software*, was generated to document the impact of our exhibit on scholarship and the field. In it we logged 503 visitors to the exhibit site and an additional 107 at the Hugo House event. Over the course of two months before and after the show, over 1600 visitors came to the website from 21 different countries. An additional 1000 people visited the curators' individual pages or the "Readings and Performances" announcement page. The reach of our social media campaign netted over 40,000 Friends of Fans. The event also was referenced in five publications, including *Kairos* and *Digital Humanities Now*. As we curators were able to show in our "Impact Report," the exhibit had a significant impact on raising awareness of electronic literature among literary scholars.

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### *Electrifying Literature: Affordances and Constraints*

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I followed up the MLA exhibit with a juried show, once again, for the Electronic Literature Organization. This show, entitled *Electrifying Literature: Affordances and Constraints*, ran from June 20-23 in Morgantown, WV in conjunction with the 2012 Electronic Literature Organization conference. Co-curated with the conference chair Sandy Baldwin, the exhibit took a cue from *Windows into Art*, a fine and media art exhibit I co-curated in 2009 with Vancouver artist Karen Madsen that took place in downtown Vancouver in seven different locations. I envisioned the ELO exhibit also distributed across the city in both public and academic spaces. *Electrifying Literature*, however, was quite larger than *Windows into Art*, with 55 artists (and or teams) distributed well over a mile along High Street and University Avenue instead of 16 artists (or teams) distributed over a few blocks.

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Figure 10.

The sites — the Monongalia Arts Center (MAC), the Arts Monongahela Gallery, the WVU Downtown Library, WVU's Colson Hall, & the Hazel Ruby McQuain Amphitheater — included a mix of indoor and outdoor space, public and academic settings, and private and community art centers. Baldwin and I also expanded the scope of the exhibit to include sonic art, experimental or conceptual multimedia works, and locative works. Organizing the show in this way allowed us to promote electronic literature beyond the ELO conference audience in order to grow the organization and build support for education, particularly for higher education and media art. Placing art at two downtown galleries and the public amphitheater were attempts to reach this goal.



Figure 11.

The curatorial design aimed to match each venue to the art and, then, place the art within an appropriate, or specific, space inside the venue. For example, at the gallery and art center, we used pedestals for the computer stations, while at Colson Hall, home of the English Department, we placed computer stations on tables and provided chairs for sitting down and studying the works. In terms of site-specificity, we placed Jim Bizzocchi's ambient video in the MAC at the turn of the marble staircase leading to the second floor — a space that allowed the delicate sound of the water trickling over rocks found in his video to echo and draw visitors' attention as they entered the building. At the library we installed "Three Rails Live," a video created by Scott Rettberg, Nick Montfort, and Roderick Coover at the bottom level of an atrium space that carried sound up the stairwell but not into the study areas.

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An exhibit website produced in advance of the event provided conference attendees with detailed information about the artists, works, venues, as well as with a site map and a curatorial statement outlining the vision for the exhibit. Five trained undergraduate docents I brought with me and the five graduate docents studying under Baldwin provided assistance to both exhibit visitors and conference attendees. The exhibit also introduced a series of retrospectives, the first ever offered at an ELO conference, featuring prominent artists whose work has inspired others. Honored in this way were Alan Bigelow, J. R. Carpenter, M.D. Coverley, Judy Malloy, and Jason Nelson.

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#### *Avenues of Access: An Exhibit & Online Archive of New "Born Digital" Literature*

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The MLA invited Inman Berens, Emerson, and I back to curate an exhibit for its 2013 convention taking place from January 3-5. Emerson was unable to join us, but Inman Berens and I, along with six undergraduate docents traveled to Boston, MA to mount the show. This one, entitled *Avenues of Access: An Exhibit & Online Archive of New "Born Digital" Literature*, was intended to differ from the previous MLA exhibit.

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Figure 12.

Playing off the theme of “access” stated in the MLA’s convention title and having already established the previous year electronic literature as an artifact for exploration by humanities scholars, Inman Berens and I aimed at providing more opportunity for in-depth study of electronic literature. So, rather than 160 works organized into 10 categories, as found in the previous exhibit, we offered 30 organized into five. And instead of mounting computers on pedestals, we placed them on large, round tables with accompanying chairs on which to sit and comfortably study.

Also available was a special “Antecedent Station” that showcased Ian Bogost’s literary game, *A Slow Year*, and the book, *10 Print Chr\$(205.5+Rnd(1)); : Goto 10*, written by Nick Montfort and nine other scholars. Visitors were invited to play Bogost’s game on an Atari Video Computing System and run the book’s titular command themselves on a Commodore computer. A “Creation Station” also made it possible for visitors to construct their own poems with a JavaScript Poetry Generator. An evening of readings and performances were held for the second year, this time at Emerson College. Eight artists as well as authors of *10 PRINT* performed for an audience of 200 people in the Bordy Theatre.

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“The Impact Report” for the 2013 exhibit documents a growing interest in electronic literature and an understanding of its potential for creating new knowledge: 14 scholarly references, 12 reviews of works on *I ♥ E-Poetry*, four reviews of the exhibit, itself, in journals in the U.S. and Europe, and 10 essays and presentations by the curators. Our findings also revealed that visitors purposefully sought the exhibit out, expecting it to be offered at the convention and that when they came, they “lingered for upwards of an hour, even two, immersing themselves in the various generic stations and talking with curators and other scholars about connections between their own research and the exhibited e-lit.” We found that “the natural affinity between e-literature and digital humanities manifested itself in conversations that . . . spark[ed] scholarly collaboration on projects, speaking invitations and publications” and discovered that “young scholars [were thinking about revising] their courses of study and dissertation plans to account for electronic works they encounter[ed] at MLA e-lit exhibits” [Grigar and Inman Berens 2013b]. Following the exhibit, I received an invitation to give a public lecture about curating electronic literature for the *Digital Cultures* series hosted at Bowling Green State University the following May, reaching yet another audience for electronic literature.

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#### *Electronic Literature & Its Emerging Forms*

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Figure 13.

Probably the most challenging exhibit I have ever mounted was *Electronic Literature & Its Emerging Forms* for the Library of Congress, held from April 3-5, 2013. Co-curated with Inman Berens and held in the magnificent Jefferson

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Building at the library, the exhibit — featuring a long bank of tables stacked with books from the library’s vast holdings comprising a “Context Station,” five computer stations featuring 27 works of electronic literature, and a second long bank of tables comprising the Creation Station, daily artists readings, a rare book exhibit, a keynote, and panel presentations — also had one of the shortest runs of any show I had ever done: only 15 hours. As expected from an exhibit held at such a popular tourist site in Washington D.C., it also saw the most traffic of any other exhibit I had curated: over 750 on-site and 5000 online visitors, all within a few short hours. It was also the first show I had ever mounted at a public library, and since it happened to be the most important library in the U.S., the exhibit was designed to make the biggest splash possible for electronic literature, its art and scholarship. No costs were spared, and no holes were barred to achieve this big goal.

But it was also intended to achieve another, more subtle, goal — that is, to establish electronic literature as *Literature*, without any modifiers attached to its name. As I wrote in my curatorial statement about the exhibit, it was designed to: build on scholarship by Eduardo Kac and C. T. Funkhouser to

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make the argument — one expressed experientially rather than in written form — that electronic literature is a natural outgrowth of literary experimentation and human expression with roots in print literary forms and, so, constitutes an organic form generating from the dynamic human spirit that is evolving, will continue to evolve through time and medium. No matter the medium — orality, writing, print, electronic, mobile — give an artist something, anything, to create with — air, animal skin, paper, computer screen — and she or he will find a way to use it for making art. This impulse is, after all, a feature of our humanity. [Grigar 2013b]

The overarching conceptual framework underpinning the exhibit centered, therefore, on the experimental nature of electronic literature and its connection to print literature, in general. There were five impulses toward experimentation reflected in the stations: from concrete to kinetic, from cut up to broken up, from pong to literary games, from the Great American Novel to multimodal narratives, and from artists’ books to electronic art.

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The curatorial design I produced served to visualize this point. The exhibit was laid out into three main sections. Print books and other analog materials from the library’s collections were displayed on the “Context Station” located on the left hand side of the room.

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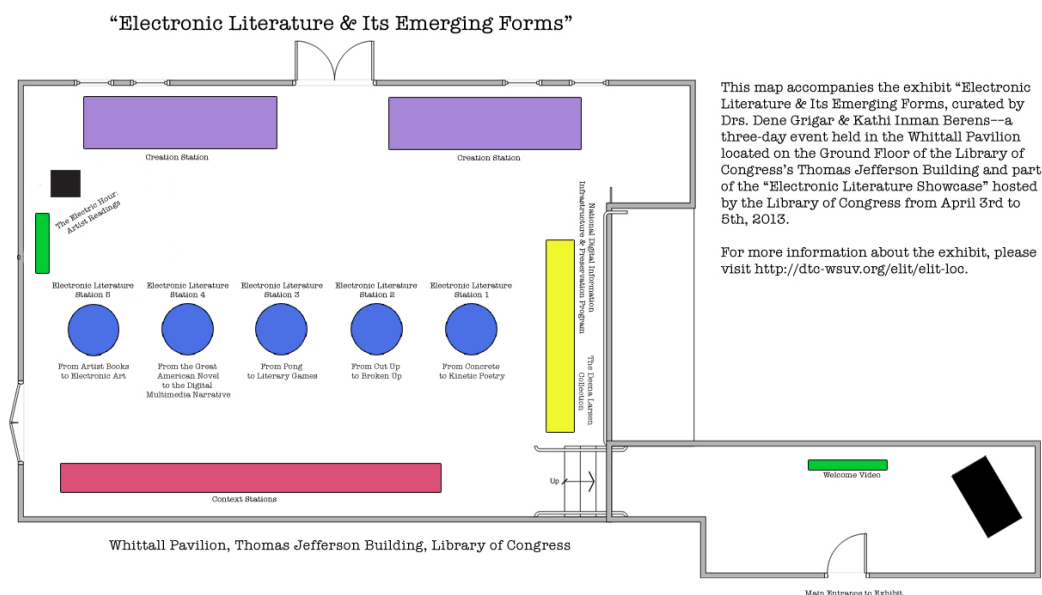


Figure 14.

The works of electronic literature were displayed on five “Electronic Literature Stations” arranged down the middle of the room. Finally, writing supplies and other media were made available for hands-on experiences on “Creation Stations,” or

maker stations, found on the right hand side of the room. This layout encouraged a visitor, for example, to explore a concrete poem by ee cummings found in a book at the Context Station, walk across the aisle to the “Electronic Literature Station” directly across from it and see Dan Waber’s kinetic poem, “Strings” and, then, walk across the aisle to the “Creation Station” where a typewriter and paper (with shapes already provided for filling in with text) were available for making his or her own concrete poem. Once again, I brought trained undergraduate docents with me to greet visitors and assist them with the computers and works and to help with monitoring the room and the media.

The exhibit was reviewed at *I ♥ E-Poetry* and by *The Huffington Post* and referenced in eight essays by scholars in the U.S. and Europe. As mentioned, over 750 visitors came to the exhibit during its 15-hour run, with an additional 55 people attending the keynote by Stuart Moulthrop and panel presentations by Nick Montfort, Matt Kirschenbaum, Inman Berens and me that took place on Friday afternoon following the exhibit’s closing. During the two months surrounding the show, the exhibit averaged a weekly reach of close to 2500 visitors at its Facebook page. It was featured in three Library of Congress publications, and the website remains archived at the library.

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#### *Exploring the Electronic Literary Landscape of the Pacific Northwest*

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Figure 15.

I followed the Library of Congress exhibit two months later with a small show for the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI), at Victoria, Canada, that was open for one night only on June 6. *Exploring the Electronic Literary Landscape of the Pacific Northwest*, co-curated with time-based media artist Brenda Grell, consisted of nine works by six artists, all of whom were born and/or currently working in the Pacific Northwest. This was the second DHSI I had attended, and in the year between my experience in 2012 and 2013 the event had grown to 400 participants. Occurring alongside DHSI was the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences’ “Congress,” which brought in hundreds more scholars to the campus. So, our visitor base drew from a large number of people working in the area of the humanities and Digital Humanities, many of whom had come specifically to network with colleagues and learn more about digital technologies needed for undertaking their research. Although some of these scholars overlapped with those who frequent MLA conventions, the addition of the Congress expanded the audience for electronic literature.

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Held at the opening night reception for DHSI, the exhibit, for reasons stated previously, garnered much traffic. In fact, in its short two-hour run, it saw twice as many visitors as the MLA 2013 exhibit did in three days. The trained undergraduate docents Grell and I brought with us proved a necessity and a valuable resource. They helped field questions and assisted the hundreds of visitors who crowded into the hallway that served as our exhibit space. The event resulted in an invitation to Hamilton College, to give a workshop in the spring 2014 about how to teach electronic literature, as well as an invitation to teach a week-long course on the topic of electronic literature at DHSI 2014.

#### *Pathfinders: 25 Years of Experimental Literary Art*

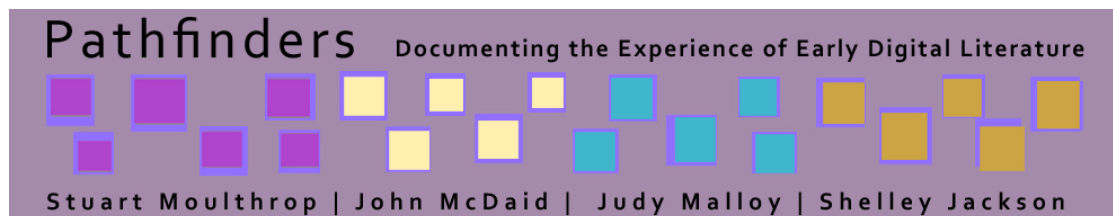


Figure 16.

The final exhibit I discuss is *Pathfinders: 25 Years of Experimental Literary Art* that took place at the MLA 2014 convention from January 9-11, 2014. Co-curated with Stuart Moulthrop, the exhibit generated directly out of our research project, *Pathfinders: Documenting the Experience of Early Digital Literature*. The *Pathfinders* exhibit featured the work of the pioneering experimental literary artists of the late 1980s and early 1990s whose work Moulthrop and I preserved in the *Pathfinders* project. The exhibit also highlighted innovative contemporary artists experimenting today with computing technologies for literary production. In sum, the exhibit made the argument that literature is not relegated to paper and ink, but transcends all mediums and is expressed through technologies available on hand [Grigar and Moulthrop 2013].

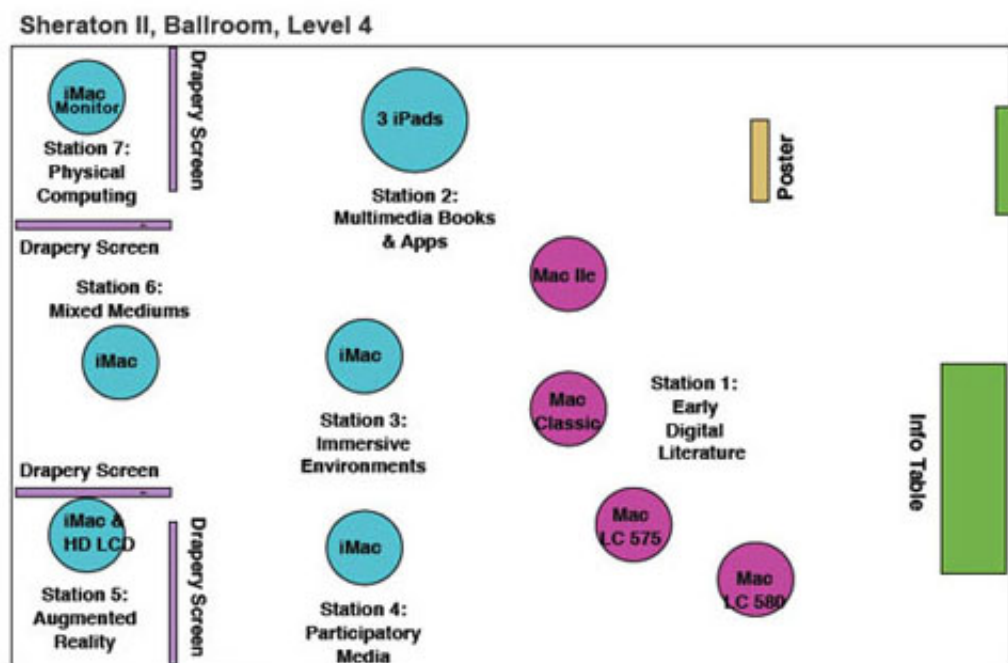


Figure 17.

The show was laid out into two main sections. The first presented three of the four early works of digital literature that comprise the current preservation efforts of the *Pathfinders* project: John McDaid's *Uncle Buddy's Phantom Funhouse*, Judy Malloy's *Uncle Roger: The Blue Notebook*, and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*. These works were made available at the exhibit on the computers on which the works were originally experienced by readers at the time of their



publication. The computers are part of my personal collection from the Electronic Literature Lab, the site where the *Pathfinders* research took place. Also highlighted in this section was the raw video footage of the artists' traversals that our research team produced for the *Pathfinders* project. The second section of the exhibit, entitled "Current Directions," featured contemporary electronic literature artists who have produced narratives, poetry, drama, and essays via physical computing technologies, augmented reality, social media, mobile media and other innovative approaches. The exhibit was devised to illustrate that just as hypertext authoring systems like Storyspace and Hypercard were seen as new technologies that allowed for highly experimental writing in the 1980s to early 1990s [Bolter 1991], these contemporary technologies also lend themselves to compelling experimental literary art. The idea of "experimental literary art" found in the title intentionally moved electronic literature squarely into literature with no qualifiers needed to explain the absence of print and the presence of the computer medium.

## Conclusion



Figure 18.

The work I have been doing for these last six years to promote electronic literature through curating works has involved reading and studying, designing and building, writing and thinking, organizing and structuring, innovating and inventing, judging and assessing, and negotiating and coercing. I have created my own media archaeology lab, replete with 54 vintage computers dating back to 1983, for experimenting with producing, preserving, and curating electronic literature. I am involved in preservation activities, like the *Pathfinders* project [Grigar and Moulthrop 2013], to discover methods of maintaining electronic literature through time. I have devoted time and energy to developing best practices unique to electronic literature curating, and I have mentored others — like scholars Kathi Inman Berens and Lori Emerson, not to mention the many undergraduate students who have taken my course on the topic of curating or work with me in my small gallery in downtown Vancouver — so that they can learn to undertake this work, as well. The critical and scholarly practice that make up this kind of work involve a deep knowledge of the field as well as a wide array of methods, many of which I have invented. Like the authors of *Digital\_Humanities*, I see these two activities as research.

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

[1] A more complete history of Uncle Roger can be found at Judy Malloy's Authoring Software, [http://www.well.com/user/jmalloy/uncleroger/uncle\\_readme.html](http://www.well.com/user/jmalloy/uncleroger/uncle_readme.html).

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